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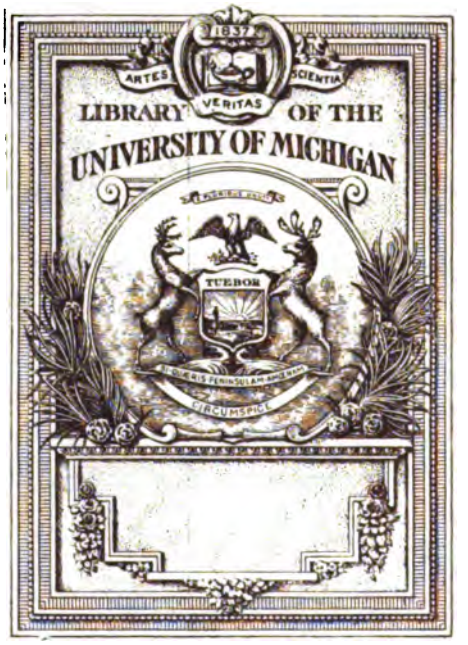
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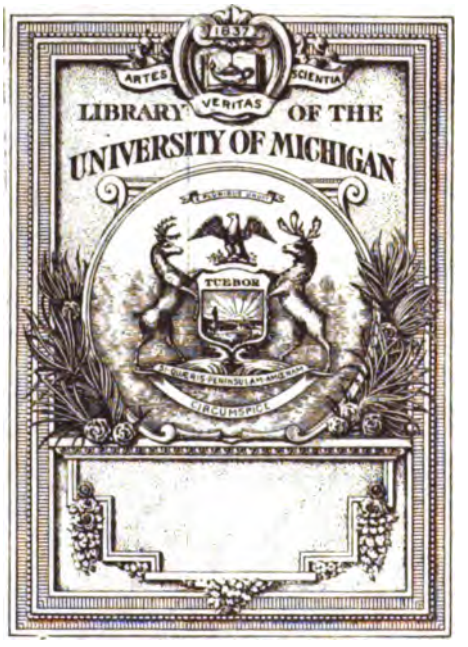
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THE MATCHMAKERS

BY

J. E. BUCKROSE

AUTHOR OF "SPRAY ON THE WINDOWS," ETC.

NEW YORK

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By George H. Doran Company

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THE MATCHMAKERS

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CHAPTER I

WHICH INTRODUCES ALL THE MATCHMAKERS

MRS. HEWITT lay on the sofa by the window with the light on her book and the fire gently warming her toes. It would have seemed more remarkable had she been doing anything else.

Mr. Hewitt sat in his study trying to make a screen of holy thoughts between his mind and the household bills, so that he could more convincingly write of the peace which passes understanding in his Easter sermon.

Old Stocks, the odd man, prodded gently at the lettuce bed, fearful as ever lest he should hurt the soil from which he sprang. For Stockses had lived at Little Pendleton through many, many generations, and he no doubt instinctively felt, with the churchyard only just over the hedge, that he might be prodding the ashes of an ancestor.

Mary, the maid of all work, was kneeling on the kitchen floor beside a sick chicken, trying to tempt its failing appetite with a little tea, because she was full of a divine, ill-regulated kindness towards everything ill or old, and she felt sure that good, strong, treacly tea must cheer up anything that breathed. Her grate and herself remained in morning *toilette*.

Jack, the boy of the family, aged eight, whose late advent had given Mrs. Hewitt a plausible reason for occupying the sofa permanently, was at the lane-end fighting Bobby Parker.

Peggy stood in the far French window of the sitting-room, beyond the one which shed a pleasant light on Mrs. Hewitt's novel, and she held a parcel smuggled under her arm with an air of having killed something in it and being about to make away with the remains.

"Going out!" sighed Mrs. Hewitt. "How I envy you!" and she turned comfortably the page of her gentle sedative.

"Poor mother!" said Peggy, flushing a little with sympathy as she never failed to do after this remark, though it came at least once a day, for the idea of remaining still and indoors seemed so terrible to her ardent, active nature.

"Come here and give me a kiss, dear," said Mrs. Hewitt, "and don't forget the sweetbread for my supper if you should be passing that way. I seem somehow to fancy a sweetbread to-night."

"Good-bye; I'll be sure to remember," said Peggy, running out into the garden. She held the bundle close to the side away from her mother and did not return, though a faint "Peggy!" shrilled across the lawn, reminding her of the omitted kiss.

"Stocks!" she said, stopping short. "Still at that lettuce bed?"

"Yes, Miss. Slow and sure. Slow and sure. When you get to my time o' life you'll know that's best way," said Stocks, taking the opportunity to lean openly on his spade handle. "The hare and the tortus is a lesson for all on us, Miss Peggy."

The semi-clerical air with which he said this, added to the trousers tied with string below the knee, showed plainly that Stockses had said "A-a-men!" in Pendleton church and tilled the rectory garden until their descendant was bound to bear visible signs of origin.

But Peggy was not amused: she had the salad accompanying the cold meat of a whole summer to consider.

"That silly old hare and tortoise tale," she replied, "has comforted more lazy people into being bone-idle than anything ever invented. It's the—the mental soothing syrup of the inefficient."

"Eh!" said Stocks, prodding again. "Soothing syrup is a thing I never did hold with, though when you and Mr. Charles gets married and has half a dozen of 'em squalling round, you mayn't tek quite such an 'igh tone about——"

"Stocks!" said Peggy.

'Well, 'm?" said that astute sexton, winking slowly at a worm, sure now of having diverted attention from his own shortcomings.

"How dare you speak in that way about Mr. Tremaine and myself?"

Stocks straightened his back ostentatiously, rubbed it, and gazed mildly at his young mistress.

"Well—I don't know about gentry, of course—but in our class o' life, when a young couple walks out, it mostly ends that-a-way. 'Less he gives 'er the chuck. But I wouldn't go for to think that of Mr. Charles, though there is a main o' young ladies in these parts to one young feller. I'd say a word to him myself, I would, before I'd see that done."

"This village gossip is abominable," said Peggy, very straight and bright-eyed. "Mr. Tremaine and I both chance to be fond of walking, that is all—and I shall be obliged if you will contradict the rumour whenever you hear it."

Stocks scratched his head, the outward sign of a working conscience.

"But truth's truth," he argued, "and if I'm saying you *don't* walk out together, and you two go past at that very minute all of a laugh and a lark and what a jolly world this is to be sure—What do I look like then?"

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"Well—it's her going-away blouse. I wanted it to be nice," said Peggy.

"Wasted! There's only two kinds of women you work for: one that minds the inside and one that doesn't," said Miss Batten. "However—I daresay she'll think she's off to Paradise in it. You and me knows better, Miss Peggy."

Peggy shook her head wisely, remembering that the Reverend James and Mrs. Hewitt were once young lovers.

"Yes, indeed. I've no illusions about marriage."

"It's too chancy," pursued Miss Batten. "People object to lotteries in papers, even the kind you have to make up a line of poetry about; and yet the way they go off for life without so much as knowing if the other person snores. Well, it beats me!"

Peggy looked thoughtfully at Miss Batten.

"All the same, I don't want Gladys to get into the wrong position at the start," she said. "It would be too horridly superior if her husband woke her up and said: 'Don't snore!' She'd never get the upper hand again. I wonder"—tentatively—"if I should offer to lend her that nasal spray we bought for mother?"

"Oh!" Miss Batten dashed down the blouse. "I know now how those murders get done that nobody can ever understand! It's people like you, Miss Peggy, that try to make somebody happy once too often and get hit on the head at last."

"Then you don't think it would do," said Peggy, parting with reluctance from her idea.

"Not unless you want the wedding to be held somewhere else, and Mr. Wakefield to give up being churchwarden, and——"

"I'll leave it, then," said Peggy hastily. "Is this the petticoat? I must go now."

They tiptoed down the passage.

"Fancy if Miss Tremaine knew! She'd be as horrified as mother."

"Look better of her to earn something instead of letting her nephew keep her," retorted Miss Batten. "But she's the sort that would starve gracefully with her hands across her and call it Providence."

"She brought up Mr. Tremaine before she lost her money. You must remember that," said Peggy.

"Um—well," Miss Batten paused. "There'll be no marrying for him."

"Don't suppose he wants to," said Peggy gaily. "Anyway, he's out of danger. Advice to young men about to marry—get a motor bicycle!"

"He has to have one to get backwards and forwards to the bank in Melbury," said Miss Batten. "Miss Tremaine won't leave Little Pendleton. What else is he to do?"

"I never blamed him," retorted Peggy; then she went away and Miss Tremaine emerged from the front room.

"Miss Peggy again, I see."

"Yes," acknowledged Miss Batten, unable to put the girl's hurrying figure down to an optical delusion.

"Always at the dressmaker's. And her parents positively *indigent*. I cannot understand it," said Miss Tremaine, settling her eyeglasses on her long thin nose.

"She spends practically nothing," said Miss Batten, trying at once to conciliate truth and Miss Tremaine, and succeeding with neither.

"I have eyes," said Miss Tremaine. "Miss Peggy's appearance is not in the least poor. It never is."

"It never would be," retorted Miss Batten. "There's some women would be dowdy with all Paris to run at, and some that would be smart on a desert island in a string of beads and an old sack. It's as much nature as how your hair grows."

"Ah!" said Miss Tremaine, looking up the street and

obliterating the little dressmaker. It was a habit of hers which made some people dislike her. But she meant kindly, in her way, and had brought a new corn plaster for Miss Batten that very afternoon.

Peggy meanwhile pursued her way up the sunny, flowery village street. She nodded and spoke to every man, woman, child, and dog whom she met, because they were all acquaintances who would have been surprised had she omitted this ceremony. And her heart also, quite unconsciously, greeted every tree and sun-steeped cottage and little familiar garden. These were all dear friends surrounded by happy memories. She loved the tree near the blacksmith's forge, whose bare branches stood out so fine and clear against the delicate grey-blue sky, with a tenderness as natural as that she felt for her mother.

At the turn beyond the blacksmith's, where the road branched towards the woods and the rectory, she saw a little cloud of dust, while a buzzing sound heralded the advance of Charley Tremaine on his motor-cycle. An old crow flew above the beeches, crying out: "Love! Love! Yah! Bah!"

Peggy turned with determination into the nearest cottage. She agreed with the crow. And here, opportunely enough, the views of both met confirmation, for a young wife sat weeping by the fire.

"Toothache?" said Peggy.

The afflicted one shook her head.

"Baby ill?"

"No, thank you."

"Then what is it?" demanded Peggy.

"I'm just dowley—so dowley I don't know what to do. That's all," sighed young Mrs. Taylor.

"But why—isn't your husband good to you?"

"Good? Of course he is!" said young Mrs. Taylor, bristling a little. Then she relapsed again. "It's being

by myself in this little house, and nobody to talk to, and me used to service and plenty of company. Oh! I do wish I could hear a tram go past, or a man calling fish, or anything."

"Well, you would get married, you know," said Peggy. "You can't be married and unmarried too."

"No, no," sobbed young Mrs. Taylor. "But that's what I'd like to be. That's what we'd *all* like to be."

"Rubbish!" said Peggy. "That's not sense."

"You're not married. You don't know. It's far more sense than what you think for," wailed young Mrs. Taylor. "Wait and see. When you and Mr. Tremaine——"

"There won't be any me and Mr. Tremaine," said Peggy indignantly. "And of all the horrible, gossipy little places——"

"No offence meant, I'm sure," said young Mrs. Taylor, forlornly wiping her eyes. "When I was a girl *I* thought I knew all about marrying, but it was like looking in at a grocer's window and thinking you knew all about cheese. You don't——"

"Look here," interrupted Peggy, not that she was afraid of matrimonial revelations, for her visits in Little Pendleton had enabled her long ago to take the plain facts of human nature as they were, like air and bread, "what you want is a change. I'll mind baby to-morrow while you go in by the carrier to Melbury." At which young Mrs. Taylor cheered up sufficiently to show Peggy the way about the baby. But when she was moved to exclaim, looking sentimentally at her young visitor, "Any one can see you was born to be a mother," Peggy restrained a desire to fling the helpless infant at its parent's head, and went along the street to the butcher's shop.

"Sweetbreads?" said the butcher, who was a fat, solid,

obstinate man with a slow tongue. "No, I'm sorry I can't oblige."

"But there are some there," said Peggy, pointing.

"Sweetbreads," repeated Mr. Dunn, "goes with sirloins and legs, not with scrag-ends and shins. I'm sorry. But it goes like that."

"It never used to do," said Peggy.

"No. Mr. Lawry hadn't come to the Hall. There wasn't so many sirloins and legs about."

"He looks as if he lived on prime joints," said Peggy, losing her temper.

"So he does, so he does," agreed Mr. Dunn, "and," he added, rousing himself, "I'm glad his food suits him. I'm glad it does. It ought to. It's all paid for—*it* is."

Peggy flushed and her eyes widened.

"I—I was to pay for the sweetbread," she said hastily bringing out her little leather purse.

Then the butcher flushed in his turn.

"No, no. Put your money up, Miss Peggy. Here, I dessay I can spare a sweetbread. Missus!" And his wife came forth, a tall, well-dressed woman with blue eyes and an ingratiating manner when anything was to be gained by it.

"Miss Peggy wants a sweetbread," continued Mr. Dunn, "for her ma's supper."

"They are all ordered for the Hall," said Mrs. Dunn rather shortly.

"Sorry to disoblige," said Dunn, standing in his doorway, "but those that gets the most meat has first choice. Same everywhere. Meat's meat, and money's money."

Peggy silently bowed before this irrefutable truth, and was turning away when she saw the new owner of the Hall just beyond the shop doorway. His good boots shone, his red face glowed, his excellent clothes fitted so well, yet seemed in some impalpable way scarcely able to contain his exuberant limbs.

"Mr. Lawry!" called Peggy, her pleasant voice slightly squeaky with excitement, "I—would you—that is, I hear you have ordered all the sweetbreads, and I want one for my mother's supper."

Lawry naturally looked surprised.

"Of course—no consequence at all," he said rather largely. "Here, Dunn, put them up now, and I will take them round for Miss Hewitt."

"Grease-proof paper! Bass!" commanded Dunn, packing industriously.

"So pleased you came, sir," breathed Mrs. Dunn, hovering near. "We were so reluctant to disappoint Miss Peggy, and yet——"

"There!" Mr. Lawry took the bass, beamed on Peggy, and stepped forth. "Now we're all right. Eh?"

"How very kind of you!" said Peggy, greatly touched, for she had understood in the village that Lawry was a mean man, excepting in matters appertaining to his own comfort or enjoyment, and she was truly glad to find herself mistaken.

Mr. and Mrs. Dunn looked after them with deep interest, and from every cottage down the village street there gleamed an interested eye.

"Miss Peggy and the new gentleman from The Hall!"

"Ay—if she could only get him!"

'He'll want money as well as looks, he will. He's that sort."

"Nobody's any sort when it comes to being in love. Makes misers chuck the coin about, and free-loving folks turn misers."

"Well, I only hope and trust she does get him!"

So, like a sort of village litany, there went from house to house a petition that Miss Peggy might secure the affluent gentleman by her side, and ride in big motor-cars for ever after.

The landlord of the Blue Lion represented the com-

munity when he remarked at his window: "On'y let Mr. Lawry come here. We'll speak up for her, and no mistake."

"I did tell him as how she sat up all night with our Sally," piped a woman holding a jug.

The landlady laughed jovially as she pulled the beer-pump.

"You leave Miss Peppy to manage it for herself. She's clever enough and pretty enough, I'm sure."

The landlord winked.

"She's no prettier than Miss Ethel Torwood, so far as that goes, but she's got a way with her. That's what matters. A pretty girl without a way with her's like—like brándy sauce without the brandy in. No good—no good!"

Peggy meanwhile ran singing up the drive to the house, quite unaware that the people of Little Pendleton were experiencing through her the delightful sensation of interfering in some one else's business with a good object.

"Here are the sweetbreads, Mother!" she cried, popping her head in at the door. "Mr. Lawry had ordered the lot, but he gave them up and insisted on carrying them home for me. Wasn't it nice of him?"

"Oh, it was, dear," said Mrs. Hewitt. "He came all the way? How considerate!"

And as Peggy vanished into the kitchen to cook the supper, Mrs. Hewitt glanced across at her husband.

"Charming of Mr. Lawry, was it not, James?"

"Very," said Mr. Hewitt, staring at his paper.

For he knew what his wife meant, and he viewed Peggy's possible lover with all a father's odd, unreasoning distaste: in that brief passage between Mr. and Mrs. Hewitt lies, in fact, the great difference in feeling between the father and mother of a girl. Then came Peggy's fresh voice across the silence.

"Father! Miss Tremaine is at the churchyard gate! You'll be late again!"

Mr. Hewitt jumped up, and as he adhered to the clerical habit of the 'eighties his coat tails flew in the pleasant evening breeze when he hurried across the lawn, while the bell rang for evensong, showing that Peggy had already reached the bell-rope under the tower.

"Plod! Plod!" crunched Miss Tremaine's sensible boots upon the gravelled path, and Peggy chuckled, for it was one of the things which made life full in Little Pendleton to see whether the Rector would manage to emerge from the vestry before Miss Tremaine reached her seat. But the ringer always kept on with her regular, solemn "Come! come! come!" even if the clock had already passed the hour.

As she let her hands drop from the heavy rope this evening, and walked up the church with the sunset light about her, and her father's voice saying the wonderful words which have almost lost their meaning to the ear, though they speak so much the more beautifully to the heart—like a mother's good-night to her child—she experienced that most exquisite, spiritual joy of youth which is not just animal pleasure in life, but comes from seeing life upon the happy background of eternity.

After service, when she and her father walked arm-in-arm past the green graves of the farmers who had gathered their last harvest, Mr. Hewitt paused, as he so often did in his place, and at this hour, with a look so calmly radiant that it was, itself, like the glow of a quiet sunset.

"I like to think of those sane and honest lives," he said, "don't you, Peggy?"

Peggy stooped down.

"Yes," she said, carefully dislodging a dandelion, for she felt so sure that the Tabitha Moore, who lay there, would have been annoyed to see the grave untidy.

Dusk fell on this part of the Rector's parish before he was called in to supper, and Peggy sat flushed with cooking and eagerness at the foot of the table. There were primroses in a big, low bowl, and stewed gooseberries gathered from the garden the previous year and bottled at home, and a great jug of yellow custard, because eggs were plentiful in April, and the sweetbreads delicately cooked and golden in a blue dish.

A pretty meal, wih Peggy's bright face shining across the primroses, and the Rector thanked God for it with a fine simplicity of earnestness before remarking to his wife:

"Now, Agnes, here is something you can fancy to-night."

For a great deal depended upon Mrs. Hewitt being able to have what she fancied—otherwise mysterious pains and *malaises* came on which made the whole household depressed and uncomfortable.

"I'm sure I don't mind what I take," said Mrs. Hewitt, moving languidly from the sofa to the table, "only the doctor said if I did not keep up my strength I should slip away from you all. Not that I am any use here; and I often think poor Peggy——"

"Mother!" protested Peggy, "we were going to have such a jolly little supper!"

Mrs. Hewitt smiled like an angel with the toothache and sat down.

"Yes, let us be merry," she said. "James, is there anything amusing in the *Melbury Times* to-day?"

"If there were, the circulation would go down at once," said Mr. Hewitt. "We like serious things, like crops and pigs and the price of butter, taken seriously."

Jack, at the corner near Peggy, piped up:

"That was a real funny bit about a drunk thinking Melbury Pump was a ghost. Bobby Parker's father read it out."

"Have some sweetbread, Peggy," intervened Mr. Hewitt.

"Never eat it, thank you," said Peggy, munching bread and butter with an air of great enjoyment.

"Liar!" muttered Jack in her ear. "You're leaving it for them."

"What's that?" said Mr. Hewitt sharply.

"Nothing. Only a sort of secret——" said Peggy. Then she began to talk of what she had seen and heard in the village—the little things which made up all the change and variety in her mother's life.

No doubt Peggy was a great gossip, but so are most people who have to bring back a daily budget to some one waiting eagerly at home, because the most scandalous old maids may, and probably have, begun their news-gathering for the sake of a mother now gone, who sat in an upper room waiting to have the dull air stirred by a little freshness from the outer world.

Meanwhile Stocks leaned peacefully by the back door munching a piece of cake.

"Nice for your poor gums," said kind Mary. "It's one Miss Peggy made for the missus."

"Won't she be vexed?" said Stocks.

Mary chuckled softly in the dusk.

"What you don't know your heart doesn't grieve over," she said. "Miss Peggy's a clever one, but she isn't so clever as what she thinks she is."

"Miss Peggy's all right," said Stocks, "though she may be a bit sharp at times."

"Of course she's all right," said Mary, bristling. "Should I be here, when I could get more wages and more outings and better eating somewhere else, if she wasn't?"

"No offence meant—hope none taken," said Stocks, raising his cup of tea. "Your very good health."

Mary nodded back over hers, and the pretty custom

which has fallen into disuse in higher circles made a pleasant air of gallantry about the Rector's back door.

"Here's hoping she'll get him," said Mary, raising her cup and emptying it to the sugary dregs.

"And I'm sure I say the same," responded Stocks politely, drinking and setting down the cup. "Only I hope," he continued, "that Mr. Lawry won't hear about her having walked out with Mr. Charles."

"Get along with you!" said Mary. "To think you've lived to be"—she paused, ever tender-hearted—"middle-aged, and you don't know a second sweetheart only hardens a man on."

"Perhaps gentry's different," said Stocks anxiously. "Anyway, I shall just catch him when he's a-walking in the churchyard, and put that all right. I shall tell him Mr. Charles and Miss Peggy changed rattles in their creddles. He won't think nothing then."

"He'll think you're an old liar," said Mary playfully, "considerin' Mr. Charles is five years older than what she is."

Stocks removed himself from the doorpost and shook off the loose crumbs with some dignity.

"You don't understand, my gell," he said, "that eddicated people sometimes talks in what's called semiphore. I only meant they'd been friends from childhood and was likely to so remain."

"Who told you Mr. Lawry come home with her?" said Mary, evading the reproof.

"Who told me? Everybody's told me," said Stocks. "They say Mr. Lawry has hundreds of grocers' shops, and she deserves a bit o' money when you think how she sews her fingers to the bone for a few shillings a week."

"She thinks nobody knows about it," whispered Mary.

Then they laughed together, kindly, though with some contempt.

"There's Mr. Charles's geese up the road," remarked Mary.

"Ay, and there's Robinson walking across the ten-acre field."

"Plenty o' traffic here."

"Oh, ay, there's always a lot going on in Little Pendleton."

CHAPTER II

THE SMALL FARMER

PEGGY'S father was still playing a sort of hide-and-seek game with the butcher's bill, behind that screen of holy thoughts which he so sincerely tried to keep upright, when his daughter came into the study.

"Really, Peggy——"

"I'm sorry, Father, but I must speak to you when Mother is not there."

Mr. Hewitt laid down his pen and sighed.

"Shut the door, dear. Well, what is it?"

"It's about Dunn's bill. His tone was really most unpleasant this afternoon when I went for the sweetbreads. Have you nearly enough money to pay it yet?"

Mr. Hewitt rose, unlocked a drawer, and brought out a great many small coins—chiefly coppers, with a few gold pieces. Then he and Peggy leaned over the table and counted anxiously.

"It's as I thought," he said. "I counted only this afternoon, but I wanted to make sure. We're twenty-five shillings short. I have five here," and he emptied his pockets.

"To-morrow's Rector's Sunday. You'll get enough to make it up, certain," said Peggy cheerfully.

"Depends if it is a wet Sunday or not," sighed Mr. Hewitt.

Peggy stood frowning. Too much familiarity with the means of grace had perhaps blunted her religious feelings in some ways.

"I say, Father, do you think it would be any use praying really hard for a fine Sunday?"

Mr. Hewitt smiled. It was a very charming smile.

"That is always good, Peggy. So long as you don't tear up your prayer-book if it rains."

Peggy smiled deprecatingly.

"I was only eight, then, Father. And I'd been praying for weeks that it might be fine at the school-treat. And, after all, it simply poured."

"Well——" Mr. Hewitt looked out through the uncurtained, leaded window-panes into the shadowy night. "It will be all right, Peggy."

Peggy nodded, her young face sweetly serious above the lamp on the table; she and her father held the same creed as that of the other Pendleton people now asleep beyond the churchyard hedge. And for a moment a lovely quiet girdled house and church; it was as if the spirits of the others joined with Mr. Hewitt and Peggy in an evening benediction.

Then Mary bumped at the door and seemed, as usual, to escape by a hair's breadth, measuring her length on the carpet, which lent a pleasant excitement to her comings and goings—not that excitement was needed in the whirl of Little Pendleton.

"There's Mr. Robinson to see you," she said. "Stocks and me watched him come across. I dessay he wants the baby christened—Mrs. Robinson's mother came yesterday, and it stands to reason——"

"Show him in," said Mr. Hewitt, while Peggy slipped out through the long window.

Mr. Hewitt went forward to greet the farmer with an old-fashioned courtesy which was as much a part of him as his fine skin and narrow-shouldered figure. Every parishioner who entered that little study felt himself to be an honoured and wanted visitor.

"I hope your wife——" began the Rector.

"It's nothing about that," interrupted Robinson. Then he sat down heavily by the corner of the writing-table. "I don't know what to do. I don't know which way to turn. I'm beaten."

"What is it, Robinson?"

"What's everything in this world? Money," said the man bitterly. "Here I've toiled and moiled the heart out of me, and thought I was straight at last and in a fair way to keep my head above water, and now the implement-maker's turned awkward. He says if I don't have the money there by to-morrow night he shall put a writ in. And I've already a bill of sale on my farm implements and furniture. And my wife's lying there ill, and she'd die if we had the bailiffs in. Before God, Mr. Hewitt, I don't know what to do. You couldn't——"

He looked at the Rector with haggard, desperate eyes, and his red, newly washed hands were clasped together on the knees of his decent Sunday suit.

The Rector gazed back, dully troubled, the bitterness of having nothing to give pressing once more deep into his generous soul.

"I wish I could, Robinson. From my heart, I do. But I can't. I'm in the same position as yourself."

Robinson smiled.

"You! With nothing to do—and your money coming in regular, whatever happens. And your fine house." He rose. "Well, it's no good—I didn't think it would be. On'y, you grasp at a straw."

The Rector rose too.

"I can't let you go away like this, Robinson," he said urgently. "I—I must trust you. The fact is, I am in debt to the butcher, myself. I have been endeavouring to save up the money and still lack some shillings——"

His thin face was flushed and his hands shook as he stood there; he was very much ashamed to own this, and yet he could not lose hold of Robinson's soul.

"Oh! It's all right," said the man drearily, looking out towards the churchyard. Then he said suddenly: "When I was ill last spring I used to wish I shouldn't get better. Even leaving the wife and all. I used to wish it in the night. No more doing more than you can do—I'm that tired——"

He was down again in the chair by the table corner, his face buried in his hands, his heavy frame heaving.

"No, no, Robinson," was all the Rector could say. "No, no, Robinson."

After a moment Robinson choked and lifted his head, wiping his eyes with his fingers.

"Had no sleep all this week—at it from four to dark —sorry to make a fool of myself," he muttered.

But that choke decided the Rector. He went straight to the drawer and took out all he had.

"What do you want?" he said.

"Ten pounds," answered the man.

"Well, here's eight pounds seventeen. Can you manage the rest?"

"I will, somehow."

They spoke breathlessly, as men might, dealing in millions, for that is how life becomes the same everywhere —in Wall Street and in Little Pendleton. The same thrilling, wonderful, dramatic experience.

"When can you pay it back?"

"Wednesday. I swear on my oath you shall have it back Wednesday. I'm going to sell the cow at Mallerby market." He paused. "You can trust me, sir."

Mr. Hewitt held out his hand.

"I do. Good-night, Robinson."

"Good-night, sir. I shan't forget."

"Oh, that's all right."

The door closed and Peggy came in through the window.

"I do hope Mrs. Robinson isn't worse," she said, blinking with the light after the dimness of the garden.

"No, only——" Mr. Hewitt paused, looking apologetically at his daughter. "I don't know what you'll say, Peggy."

"What!" Peggy jumped to it at once. "You never mean to tell me that he has been here to borrow money and that you have let him have——" She paused in breathless indignation. "Well!"

"You weren't here," explained her father anxiously. "It was simply a case of letting a man lose his faith in everything—I couldn't do that."

"But it's not honest to give money away that belongs to the butcher," said Peggy.

"I know! I know!" he agreed humbly. "Peggy"—he paused—"Robinson cried—at that table corner."

"Oh!" said Peggy; then she stood silent, thinking of the self-contained, hard-working farmer she had always known, and it made her feel oddly ashamed as well as sorry to imagine him crying there.

"You couldn't help doing it, Father," she said at last. "Nobody could."

"We must not let your mother know."

"Of course not!"

"After all," continued Mr. Hewitt, more cheerfully, "there is a strange guidance in these things, Peggy," and he brought forth a week-old London newspaper. "Only a few days ago I wrote for particulars concerning this advertisement. You see the advertisers are prepared to lend money without security to persons in a respectable position. Money is very plentiful in some circles, I gather, nowadays. I have heard of millionaires not knowing how to invest their surplus income, and this is no doubt some such affluent advertiser."

"Um," said Peggy. "But it's money-lenders all the same. I have rather a horror of money-lenders."

"There are good and bad," said Mr. Hewitt. "I remember hearing of one when I was at college—he was a Jew—a most honourable and generous fellow, I believe."

"Y-yes," said Peggy. "So there are biting dogs and dogs that don't bite—but you can't tell one from another by correspondence."

"Well, as a matter of fact," said Mr. Hewitt, drawing forth a long envelope, "I have heard from them, and I must say I was pleased with the tone of their letter: frank, honest: stating plainly that they would be glad to have the name of the Rector of Little Pendleton on their books. Their object seems partly philanthropic —to aid those who are in need, with some small profit to themselves. Naturally they might be rather glad to refer to me."

Peggy was obliged to agree with this—it also seemed to her perfectly natural and probable that any philanthropist in the world would find it a great asset to be associated with the Rector of Little Pendleton.

"It was really almost providential, my seeing that advertisement," continued Mr. Hewitt, warming to his subject. "I never read that part of the paper, as a rule, but I chanced to have left the other sheet indoors by mistake, and it was pleasant on the seat under the elm, so I just glanced down the column. I know it is the superior thing now to deride such old-fashioned beliefs, but I can't help feeling, Peggy, that I was led to look at that page of the newspaper." He paused. "I'm glad poor Robinson will sleep to-night," he added.

Peggy closed the window and saw the star above the church tower as she had seen it so many times since her childhood—clear, silver, remote—and yet belonging to them all just like the roads and the fields and the manure heaps in the farmyards—all equally a part of life as she knew it. People in quiet places sometimes

do see life whole in that way, and it gives a spaciousness of soul.

Mr. Hewitt extinguished the lamp.

"But not a word to your mother, my dear," he said.

"Do I ever?" whispered Peggy.

And as they passed the broad staircase window on their way upstairs to bed, they saw lights also twinkling out from little windows underneath the eaves in the village, so that the main street lay like streets of stars upon the darkness. It really seemed as if the part of Little Pendleton akin to the stars were answering back.

Then the lights went out, one by one; an owl hooted from the church tower. Little Pendleton was asleep.

CHAPTER III

MORNING

PEGGY sat by her bedroom window at six o'clock the next morning, making a petticoat for Gladys Wakefield's trousseau and singing to herself.

She sewed beautifully because she loved fine stitching, and she sang very softly for fear of awaking Jack, who slept next door. Every now and then she glanced out across the field at the trees, which were already clouded in outline, as they are always in the beginning of spring before the leaves come forth. Beyond the field she could see Charles Tremaine moving along his farmyard. He wore an old Norfolk jacket and corduroy breeches, but his loose-limbed, lean figure had the grace which comes from youth and fitness. Later in the morning he would attire himself for the bank counter in Melbury, but at this hour, and in the evening, he attended to his little farm.

Coo! Coo! came the sound of the stock-doves from Great Pendleton woods.

Peggy looked up again from her work and noticed how easily he carried a truss of hay across the yard. Her liking of him dated from her earliest childhood, but the remarks of Stocks and young Mrs. Taylor had stirred some new interest in watching his movements this morning.

"Idiotic Pendleton people!" she murmured impatiently, laughing at herself. "They know how often I change my shoes!"

But she was aware, beneath all this, of a sort of

pride in their curiosity; she would have been greatly surprised and hurt if they had not cared whether she changed her shoes or not.

Then her thoughts returned to Charley Tremaine. How good-looking and charming he was, and how hard he worked to keep the place going. He was of the type that inevitably possesses long-faced, spare females with excellent boots and awful hats——

"Boh!" said a voice at the door, breaking in upon her meditations.

"Jack! How dare you? Shut the door at once," exclaimed Peggy.

Jack stood in the middle of the room with his hair on end and his pyjama strings dangling.

"You said it was rats," he said scornfully. "Every morning I hear a noise and you made out it was rats. Rats, it is!"

"I didn't *say* so," said Peggy deprecatingly. "I only let you go on thinking it."

"You acted a lie," said Jack in a deep voice.

"Goodness, Jack!" said Peggy startled, "you mustn't imitate Father like that. You'll get into awful trouble!"

"I don't care. You did——"

"Oh!" said Peggy. "Please don't begin arguing. You'd simply argue a dog's hind leg off."

"I want to," said Jack. "I'm practising. I'm going to be a lawyer and get money for every argue—oh!" he ran to the window. "There's Mr. Charley! Mis-ter-Char-ley!"

"Hush! Mother will hear," said Peggy, grabbing him from behind.

But the clear, piercing notes had travelled easily across a garden, a road, and a field. Tremaine waved back, and began to run towards the rectory.

"Now you've done it," said Peggy to Jack. "Fetching Charley away from his work!"

Jack chuckled; a ribald youth in his outgrown pyjamas and bare feet.

"What price the knife he bought me yesterday?"

"What do you mean, Jack?" said Peggy severely.

"Why—it's the beginning of courting you—silly! Bobby Parker said he used to get heaps an' heaps of things given until his sisters were married, and then it all stopped. He says to me, does Bobby, yesterday, 'Make on, me lad, while you have the chance!'"

"Jack!" groaned Peggy, "that awful school! What will you learn there next?"

"Well, Miss Peggy?" called Tremaine softly beneath the window.

"It's nothing, nothing! Only this bad boy," said Peggy, leaning out; but she looked embarrassed and unlike the cool, matter-of-fact young person to whom he was accustomed.

"Well, it's nice to say 'Good-morning,' anyway," he said, laughing up at her. "And I won't have Jack blamed. He knows he can call out on me whenever he feels inclined—don't you, Jack? You be at the corner, Jack, when I come home to-night, and I'll tell you whether I've found that ball of string you want."

"There!" whispered Jack. "String, now. What did I tell you?"

Peggy's colour deepened so obviously that Tremaine might be forgiven for thinking that roses bloomed responsive to his rather ardent gaze. He had always been fond of Peggy, but, by Jove, there was something about her this April morning——

Thus did Peggy walk straight into that magic avenue which every young man keeps empty until the girl and the moment come together. But the magic only begins to work when the girl moves away down the avenue, for then her face is always turned away from him, she fleeing, he pursuing, so he fancies her a goddess until he

catches her in his arms. If he never catches her, she remains a goddess; if he does, she becomes either something much dearer than a goddess or a plain woman who has to be kept. But when she is flying before him, she is always young and beautiful, even if she has a squint and a habit of whistling through her teeth.

"Lovely morning. You must be busy!" said Peggy, waving the wedding petticoat at him in token of dismissal.

"Well, I s'pose pigs must eat," said Tremaine. "Won't you come in after I get home this afternoon—it's Saturday—and see my little pigs?"

"Very sorry," said Peggy, "but I'm minding young Mrs. Taylor's baby this afternoon."

So Tremaine returned to his pigs, and other sounds began to come across from the village. Dogs barked. Shrill, sweet voices of children fluted above the clop! clop! of chopping wood. There was a tinkle of teacups in the house below. Little Pendleton was beginning another day.

Somewhat later when the dew had dried a little, Mr. Lawry walked forth from his residence with that indefinable air of being conscious of the fine legs which was characteristic of him. He felt justly that it was no usual thing to possess a brain capable of making a fortune at forty-three and a fine leg into the bargain, and he stepped up Pendleton main street with the benevolent object of giving pleasure as well as receiving homage. These slow-going rustics must be put at their ease, and allowed to see that there was really nothing to be afraid of.

So he strode into the "Blue Lion" and took a glass of ale, contrary to his usual habit, for he was an intemperate eater, but a very abstemious drinker. And the landlord stood cordially respectful near the rum keg, listening to his guest's remarks on the weather as if they were the

words of an affable oracle, and taking in good part some advice as to the conducting of his own business.

The landlady beamed from the background, respectful also, and so open and frank that Lawry was greatly pleased with her. He thought how agreeable it was to live in a place where you were the only clever, up-to-date person—or rather he felt it, in a sort of warmness down his spine which he wrongly attributed to the "Blue Lion's" very mild ale.

But all the time, under their agreeable words, the landlord and landlady were desperately searching for a natural opening to praise Peggy, as, "Yes, sir, glorious view, sir" (*Drat it—I can't say she* made *the view!*)

"Quiet, of course," continued Mr. Lawry. "Not much traffic past here."

The landlord looked blankly at his wife over his fat cheeks. Could *she* make anything out of that? Could anybody?

Gloriously, Mrs. Jenkins rose to his appeal.

"Oh, I don't know, sir," she said, with the most open natural air in the whole world. "We get more visitors now than what we used to do." She laughed, and her laugh was just frankness grown audible. "Since Miss Peggy's grown up there's been a fair run on Little Pendleton."

Lawry stared. Peggy had seemed to him quite a pleasant girl and no more.

"Admirers?" he said.

"Ay, indeed," said the landlord, seizing Mrs. Jenkins's opportunity. "She mayn't be one of your real beauties, but she has a way with her, and you and me knows, sir, what that means."

"Who are the——" began Lawry; then he thought better of it and coughed.

"Well, I don't know as there's any one I could——" began the landlord.

"It's not for us to mention names," interrupted the landlady, frowning at her husband, "as I'm sure Mr. Lawry'll understand."

"No, no, of course not," agreed Lawry hastily. "Of course not."

"But you being our Squire now, in a manner of speaking," pursued Mrs. Jenkins innocently, "perhaps makes a difference. Perhaps you've a *right* to know what goes on. Everybody can see Mr. Tremaine is after Miss Peggy. And there's Lord St. Maldon's heir——"

"Well—she doesn't look for anything better than that, does she?" said Lawry sharply. "Good-looking, clever, rich."

Mrs. Jenkins laughed again.

"Money won't buy Miss Peggy. She's poor now, but she's connected with lots of grand folks. You never know what'll fall in. An accident. An old lady tumbling downstairs. And a fortune coming in any day."

"Bless my soul!" said Lawry. "It's wonderful how reserved these county people are. I shall have to come to the 'Blue Lion' for news, I see."

"Any time, sir. Any time you're passing we shall be proud to see you," said the landlord and landlady together, and Mr. Lawry stepped further down the street, feeling more satisfied with his legs than ever.

"But, you know," remonstrated the landlord, as soon as this guest was out of hearing, "that Lord St. Maldon's son only once walked the length of the vegetable tent at the Flower Show with Miss Peggy, and never came near nor by again. And who are her rich relations?"

"All right!" retorted the landlady. "Do it yourself next time, then! And, besides, Mr. Hewitt is second cousin once removed to some old lord or other in London."

So they watched Lawry's progress up the street in silence, and he was gratified to note their humbly ad-

miring gaze when he stopped at the Post Office. He felt it was a tribute to his wonderful powers of adaptation. As he planted his country hat more firmly on his head and asked for a shilling's worth of stamps, he saw that if a wise country had called him to be king, he would have been equally able to play the part with distinction. And, indeed, a throne was not so far distant from his place now, as the position of Squire of Little Pendleton had been from the counter whence his father started on the road to riches. Lawry, himself, had always been well off, but prosperity had not dulled those great business capabilities which enable him to seize his opportunities.

He really felt to-day that he only failed to own the earth because he did not want it, and yet he said "Good-morning" affably to young Mrs. Taylor and nodded to Stocks, who brought a parcel from the rectory.

"Ahem!" he coughed, pleasantly condescending. "Fine day for the time of year!" Then to Stocks: "Is your master at home on Saturday afternoons?"

"Oh, yes, sir," intervened young Mrs. Taylor eagerly, "but Miss Peggy won't be there, because she's coming to mind——"

"G-r-r-r-h!" coughed Stocks raucously. "I don't know the movements of the family, sir, but I am aweer that Miss Hewitt has an engagement. She is engaged frequent. She's a deal followed after, of course."

He had managed to get his back turned to Lawry with his knubbly features towards the two females, and he winked so meaningly and awfully that the baby began to howl.

"Did-um-a-dear," soothed the mother; but she felt it was all in the good cause, and added with a giggle:

"Followed after! They're round the rectory like the old Toms round our back gate. And she can cook what

you like from tripe to turkey. And not above nothing. I've seen her blacking her own——"

"G-r-r-r-h," went Stocks again, coughing down this excess of zeal more fiercely than ever, while the postmistress came to the rescue with a hasty: "The way she conducts a Mothers' Meeting! You should only hear, Mr. Lawry. But, of course, you, like myself, are not a mother!"

Then she blushed, feeling vaguely that she had said something rather doubtful, and Mr. Lawry wished them all a hearty, bluff, country-gentlemanly "Good-day" and went out.

Stocks turned upon young Mrs. Taylor.

"That was a low remark to make about the Tom cats," he said.

"Low or high," said young Mrs. Taylor defiantly, "it'll make him want to be conquering cat!"

And she flounced out, leaving Stocks and the postmistress alone.

"But I never heard tell of anybody being after Miss Peggy, only Mr. Tremaine," said the postmistress.

"Well, and I don't say she'd be the girl for my money," Stocks replied, "but we must do what we can for her. I prefer something softer and more yielding-like."

"More trustful," agreed the postmistress. "Miss Peggy writes postcards in French when she has anything particular to say to Miss Ethel Torwood. Shows a suspicious nature—that does."

"But—however——" said Stocks, hitting the side of his nose three times with his rugged forefinger.

The postmistress nodded.

Then, without further words, Stocks also went down the street.

And Lawry, on his homeward way, switched off dandelion heads, and hummed a cheerful tune, and glanced down now and then at his excellent legs, feeling as Gul-

liver looks on the cover of editions published for children, just so jollily far above the little people near him.

After a while he fell to thinking of Peggy, and wondered where her extraordinary attraction lay. It must be something which she had not troubled to display to him—or perhaps he had been blind to it, not expecting Circe in Little Pendleton, though there were plenty of pigs.

He smiled appreciatively as he made this little jest to himself, thinking what amusing ideas a chap did have when there was time to let them come. After all, those writer-people who sat still for hours ought to have a lot more funny notions than they ever did have.

Then he went back to Peggy. What *was* there about the girl?

Undoubtedly, the first effort of Little Pendleton as a matchmaker had achieved some slight amount of success.

CHAPTER IV

EVENING

PEGGY stood by the cottage door with young Mrs. Taylor's baby in her arms, looking up the road for the carrier, and hushing the child against her shoulder because it grew fretful towards evening. The cherry tree on the wall was full in flower, and made a frame of white blossom round her head and that of the baby. The pale light of an English April evening slanted across them.

It was this picture which Charles Tremaine saw when he came round the corner of the road in place of the carrier, and two pairs of eyes looked up at him with the calm, wide innocence which old painters loved to give to the Mother and Child. A second later, Peggy smiled, and the child whimpered, but the impression remained on Tremaine's mind. He had seen that which has inspired mankind since the dawn of thought—the idea of the eternal Mother and Child—though it was only Peggy calling out to know if he had seen the carrier.

When he came out of that half-dream—what was it?—he called back to her:

"Release is at hand. The cart has passed the 'Blue Lion.'"

The definite idea of marriage in connection with Peggy had, however, entered his thoughts for the first time, but he knew that he could not possibly afford to marry while his aunt lived, and she was good for another thirty years, so he put the idea away behind him as quickly as possible. A few minutes later he and Peggy were

walking down the road together, and he refused an invitation to go into the rectory.

It was no good, he told himself. The only decent thing to do was to leave Peggy alone. A man had no business to run after a girl unless he meant to marry her. But Peggy was naturally ignorant of this new train of thought, and rather surprised that he did not come in as usual. She concluded, however, that the hind who worked for him was either away or needed assistance, and that feeding and milk must come before dalliance. Love is kept in its place in Little Pendleton.

As she entered the house a sound of voices came from the drawing-room. Mrs. Hewitt sat up by the tea-table, quite alert and gay, and Mr. Torwood, a pleasant, pompous man with no chin and very little hair, emitted remarks suited to encourage an effort-making invalid. His daughter Ethel, who was exceedingly like him only with more chin and a great deal of light hair, was gracefully attentive on the other side. The Rector smiled without saying much, genuinely glad to see his wife so well because she had been ailing earlier in the day.

But Peggy's arrival distracted some of the attention, and she and Ethel Torwood began to compare vivid notes concerning Lawry, while Mr. Torwood joined in, and Mrs. Hewitt was left for a few moments to nibble her bread and butter unregarded.

She drooped in her chair, but even Mr. Hewitt failed to notice this, so engrossed was he in the conversation. Then the invalid said plaintively: "Could any one open another window? And, Peggy, I'm sorry to disturb you. But I am afraid I must ask you to help me to the sofa."

Thus she became once more the centre of attention, and soon revived sufficiently to assure her visitors that it was nothing to a woman so used to suffering.

"A good creature," said Mr. Torwood as he and his

daughter went away. "A good, patient soul if ever there was one!"

"Um," said Ethel.

"Come, come, Ethel," said Mr. Torwood in his pleasant, pompous voice, which just matched the rest of him. "Mustn't get bitter, you know. That's the worst of a quiet life, and no definite occupation. I don't know why. It used not to be so in my young days. The girls all got married then and had families to look after, or weak health, or something of that sort. Never heard of girls getting hipped because they hadn't enough to do."

Ethel laughed, but there was a slight hardness in her laughter.

"Well—I'm still of what you might call marriageable age. Hope on, Father!"

"Really! Really!" Mr. Torwood's fresh colour deepened. "It's not clever to talk like that, Ethel. You know I don't want to lose you, but a woman is happier married."

They tramped on for some distance in silence, and then Mr. Torwood remarked—

"Lawry appears to be quite a pleasant fellow—and well off, I hear. We might ask him to dinner next week."

Ethel glanced at her father sideways.

"Oh, yes. It's as well to be first in the field."

"I don't know what the devil you mean," said Mr. Torwood, tramping on ahead, greatly annoyed.

Ethel tramped behind for some distance and then ran after her father, putting her hand through his arm.

"Don't be vexed," she said. "I was only teasing. I really do think Mr. Lawry is a very nice man, and we are having some people to dine on Wednesday, so we will invite him too."

In the rectory, also, Mr. Lawry loomed large before the imagination, for Little Pendleton is like other places, and the possession of money has a magnifying effect

upon the vision, deny it who will. That is why poor people are so interested to hear that a multi-millionaire takes toast for breakfast. You take toast for breakfast. I take toast for breakfast. But the millions shining in imagination about the millionaire cause his toast-eating to be a sort of financial sacrament, so we bow our heads and wonder.

It seemed unfortunate that into the midst of this golden conversation, which was more enjoyed by Mrs. Hewitt than any held with her family for some time, there should have obtruded the name of Mr. Dunn, the butcher.

Mrs. Hewitt immediately began to feel not so well, and the Rector went off to the study to see what the man wanted.

The man wanted his money. Quite plainly and blankly that was it; he wanted his money.

The Rector stood by the table, pale and embarrassed. He was greatly ashamed before this tradesman who had brought food to his household without receiving payment, but he was more ashamed still to have fallen so far short of what the Church demanded of her clergy. He felt that he had betrayed his order as he stood there before the justly irate butcher.

"I am very sorry," he said. "You shall have the money on Wednesday. There is a small amount owing to me which will come in on that day."

"I'm surprised——" began the butcher in his slow, heavy way.

"Of course. Of course," assented the Rector humbly. "You would never expect that any one in my position——"

"I'm surprised," repeated Dunn, rolling over the interruption, "that a college gentleman like you can't think of no better thing to say than that. Everybody says that."

The Rector flushed painfully. "I can only tell you it is true."

"Well, I've a payment to make. You had the meat. Meat's meat and money's money," said Dunn, who always repeated an old remark if he could, to save the trouble of thinking out a new one. He nodded, sure of the unanswerableness of his argument, and spread his hands on his knees. "I don't like doing this," he continued, softened a little by the sense of having said a sharp thing. "I'm Dunn by name, but I'm not dun by nature, you know; not dun by nature."

The Rector stared. He had not hitherto seen the butcher in the light of a solemn joker, but then he had not been there when Dunn was conducting a bargain as man to man.

"I give you my word of honour that you shall have the money on Wednesday," he said.

The butcher rose, creaking at the joints.

"Very well, then," he said, opening the door. "I shall expect it Thursday morning—before twelve o'clock. I have a payment to make."

The sonorous voice rolled along the passage leading to the room where Mrs. Hewitt sat recovering from her tea-party.

"Yes, yes!" said the Rector. Then he murmured nervously as they emerged into the passage: "If you *could* kindly talk about some parish matter—Mrs. Hewitt—naturally wondering——"

"Do her good," boomed Mr. Dunn; then something in the Rector's anxious, humiliated face touched him, and he nodded and whispered hoarsely: "All right. *I* know. And they talk about women being down-trod."

"Mrs. Hewitt's health——" murmured the Rector, ushering his guest along with alacrity, "and so you think the right of way across the common should be——"

Thus conversing, he got Dunn outside and into the garden.

"But it's Thursday, sure?" said the butcher, all at once truculent as he realised that he was returning home without the money.

"I have given you my word that the money shall be there on Thursday before noon," said the Rector with some dignity. Then he bade Dunn good-night and re-entered the house.

But when he was once more in his study he shut the door and thought long and painfully over the matter. Supposing it were to come to the ears of the Bishop! Not that Mr. Hewitt felt any such profound reverence towards the bishop as a man, for he considered that prelate, like many modern ones, to be rather lacking in the demeanour which he deemed suitable in a prince of the Church. But he revered the office so greatly that the man became a more or less unimportant factor. And it has to be remembered that Mr. Hewitt came of a race of rather wealthy, highly connected clergy, who kept their place and expected the parish to do the same. He was inevitably more democratic than his predecessors, but the idea of being dunned for a butcher's bill was hurtful to his pride as well as to his sense of honesty. He had not been so upset for many years, and he found it quite impossible to conclude the sermon on peace which he had begun the previous day.

"Agnes," he said, after supper, "I shall just go across and inquire for Mr. Robinson's cow. The night is fine."

"Cow! Baby, you mean, my dear," said Mrs. Hewitt.

"Baby, of course," said Mr. Hewitt hastily.

"I'll come too, Father," said Peggy. "I've knitted the baby some boots."

So they walked together up the dusty road smelling of violets, and as they stood at the farm door inquiring for the baby, the Rector watched the Robinsons' red cow

feeding in the cow-stable. It was quite a robust-looking young cow, but he was so terribly anxious that nothing should happen to it. The whole affair was grotesquely like a nursery rhyme. The cow must go to market—the money must pay the Rector—the Rector must pay the butcher.

"Mrs. Robinson doing well?" said the Rector, absent-mindedly glancing up at a lighted bedroom window.

"Yes, sir," said Robinson. "We're going on all right now."

He said no more, but the strained look of the other night had gone from his face, and he looked a different man. And after a few words the Rector came away.

'I think," he said, as they entered the house, "that I will finish my sermon after all to-night." For it had somehow become possible—things seemed clearer—he felt very near to his people, nearer than he ever had done before, as he went into his study.

Peggy watched him pull down the blind and then slipped across the churchyard with her weekly sewing for Miss Batten under her arm. It was already late, so she hurried and did not remain to talk with the little dressmaker according to her usual habit on a Saturday night; but in spite of her haste the lights were all shining out from the upper windows when she returned. Black shadows lay under the yews of the churchyard, and a new-dug grave ready for Monday yawned darkly beside the path. Peggy was used to it all, and not nervous, but she felt no desire to linger on the way.

Then, as she fled through the long grass, something moved in the new-made grave. Her heart gave one thud and then seemed to cease beating. She stood quite still in the shadow of a yew, with all the village tales about Little Pendleton churchyard crowding in upon her mind. She experienced that cold, bristling fear of the supernatural which is like no other fear.

She forced herself to go on, and, with an extraordinary revulsion of feeling, she saw Stocks peer cautiously over the side of the grave.

"So I'm dead and buried and riz agen," he was muttering as he gazed round with bemused contempt at the other quiet graves under the starlight. "Precious few folks besides me saved in Little Pendleton. They must ha' been a bad lot—a bad lot—I allus thought so. B'leeve I'm the only one saved."

"Stocks!" gasped Peggy, still feeling rather faint.

"'Nangel!" hiccupped Stocks, climbing out of the grave. "'Nangel sure enough! I allus knowed you was a right 'un, Bill Stocks!"

"Disgraceful!" said Peggy, coming forth into the stronger light. "You're intoxicated, Stocks!"

'Law!" said Stocks, clinging to a grave-stone. "If I didn't think it were a 'nangel and it's our Miss Peggy. She's no angel. Too sharp for a 'nangel, she is; they're nice, trusting creeturs!"

'Where have you been to get into this disgusting state?" demanded Peggy, angry after her fright.

"Weddin'. I'm a sober man. But if you can't drink at a weddin', where can you? I've Bible 'thority for it. Go 'ome an' read yur Bible, Miss Peggy. Better'n roving the place at night for a young girl. Go 'ome!"

"I'm not going to have you laid up with rheumatism for another three months," said Peggy briskly, beginning to recover herself. "I'd enough of doing all your work last time." She paused, gazing round. "But what on earth am I to do?"

"Le' well alone," murmured Stocks. "But thas what you wimmin never can do. I was having a nice bit o' sleep—must ha' tumbled into that grave walking across—and then you come and wake me up——"

"Here!" exclaimed Peggy, seizing a stake out of the

hedge. "Here, you take hold of one end and I'll keep the other. Now! Come on!"

"I won't——" said Mr. Stocks.

"Then—then I shall hit you," said Peggy desperately.

"Shame on yer, Miss Peggy," said Stocks, beginning to stumble along. "Ill-treatin' a poor old man." Then he began to weep. "An' I done what I can for you. You ongrateful gal! I spoke up for you. Ask Mr. Lawry. But you'll never get him. You'll never get nobody. Not likely. Hard as iron. An' to think I thought you was a nangel!"

So, muttering and reluctant, he plodded down the empty village street, and at the corner of the "Blue Lion" this odd pair encountered Tremaine, returning from a pipe with the doctor.

"What on earth——" he exclaimed, stopping short in the road.

"I'm taking Stocks home," said Peggy shortly. "He's drunk!"

"Sober man," explained Stocks. "A glash does for me."

"You go home, Peggy," said Tremaine, frowning. "This is more a job for me than you."

So Peggy chopped the stick, thanked him, and ran quickly past the quiet, fragrant gardens, while Tremaine murmured sentimentally, half aloud:

"Poor little girl! She needs somebody to take care of her."

Stocks stopped short and eyed Tremaine with drunken solemnity.

"Thash just where you make a mistake," he said. "She doesn't want nobody to take care on 'er, Miss Peggy doesn't."

Then he consented to go on again without further conversation until they reached his cottage door, where he bade his protector an impressive farewell.

"Good-night," he said, "and Gor bless you. You're a nish young feller. Lemme give you a tip. She's 'ard. You'd 'ave to tek your boots off on the mat if you get her. An' do the backyard out. A man wants something more softerer in a wife. I've been married myself—I knows." He wagged an unsteady forefinger. "You tek my tip!"

Tremaine walked off without replying and had reached the gate of the little flowery untidy garden when Stocks ungently called him back.

"After all—there'sh worse," said the repentant sexton. "I doane want to do the poor lass an ill turn. She makes a piecrust agin the world. Flakey it is, and crisp o' top. There'sh a lot in that. Mebbe she carne help being 'ard."

"Get to bed with you, you old villain!" said Tremaine, pushing the man inside and closing the door.

But as he walked briskly along the hard road, his footsteps waking sleepy birds in the hedgerows, he was in some measure inclined to agree with Stocks. Peggy might with advantage be more clinging and dependent upon the judgment of strong men who necessarily knew more about life than she did. He saw with Stocks a probability that her husband might, metaphorically, be obliged to take his boots off on the mat.

When he came to this conclusion, he whistled a cheerful tune, because it was a cheering thing, and a relief, to find that he was not after all really in love with Peggy. There was no chance of his marrying, and he had no desire for a romantically hopeless love affair.

He was very glad indeed that this meeting with Peggy and Stocks had caused him to apply a test provided by a wide though desultory course of reading. If a man fell in love with a girl, he thought her perfect. He

by no means considered Peggy perfect. Therefore he was not in love with her.

He smoked his last pipe on that, very content, the long reaches of a solitary but by no means miserable bachelor existence spreading out before him.

CHAPTER VI

EASTER SUNDAY

MR. LAWRY strolled across the park next morning on his way to church with the lambs bleating and skipping and a general jocundity in the air which might have also turned his mind lightly to thoughts of love. But, as a matter of fact, he was wondering how small a sum the Squire of Little Pendleton could, with decorum, put into the plate of his parish church on a Sunday morning. His orderly spirit made him desire to create a fixed rule for this offering, and then to dismiss consideration of it for ever.

Ten shillings seemed to him too much—a shilling insufficient—he decided upon half a crown, and the matter was settled for so long as he remained Squire of Little Pendleton.

During service his devotions were at first rather hampered by the fact that he had not attended divine worship for so long a time that he had to keep a sharp eye on the standing, kneeling, and sitting, lest he should be left behind. But when Mr. Hewitt went up into the pulpit he had leisure to observe the pretty picture made by Peggy and Ethel Torwood, who sat together among the village children beneath an unstained window, the broad ledge of which was covered with green leaves and primroses in honour of Easter Day.

The sturdy rosiness of the children, the girls' more delicate bloom, and the scent of sun-warmed primroses made up altogether something very simple and English —something not thought of then, but unforgettable.

Tremaine saw it, and only thought what a pleasant Easter Day this was, so full of flowers and sunshine.

Mr. Hewitt saw it, and he spoke more simply, not talking down to his flock, but straight to them, through the hearts of the children.

Then came the stir, and the hymn, and the Communion Service, and the people came out with a sort of sober joy into the sunshine.

"Rector's not one of your rousing preachers," they said, "but he does his best."

And they went home to the Easter Sunday dinner, quite unaware of what they had taken away. It would just be waiting silently in their hearts until trial or sorrow or temptation came, and then it would give them strength.

The two girls parted at the church gate.

"So glad," said Ethel, "that you can all come on Wednesday." She bent closer, watching Lawry in conversation with her father. "He's coming."

"Like him?" said Peggy.

"I don't know—yes," said Ethel.

Peggy glanced up quickly.

"Why—you didn't at first."

"He rather grows on you. And I adore success, whatever form it takes. I like a man who is head and shoulders above the rest at his particular job."

There was a little pause as they stood there near a budding lilac in the sunshine. A softness lingered about both the girls, a hush, a tenderness, from the Easter Communion.

"Well," said Peggy at last, "I believe most of us would rather succeed in a bad thing than to fail in a good one. We've lost sight of the beauty of failure in a fine cause."

"What a serious conversation," said Tremaine over

Peggy's shoulder. "Forgive me. I couldn't help hearing. But failure in a fine cause is the romance of existence."

"Failure!" said Lawry, also approaching. "Who's talking about failure? There is no such word. It ought to be struck out of school dictionaries."

"Ah!" said Peggy, quickly, looking from one to the other. "That's fine, too!"

Mr. Hewitt smiled at the young people in the sunshine.

"Failure in a good cause is not failure," he said; "it is the beginning of another success." He stood there among them, filled with Easter joy. "That's what we celebrate to-day," he added in a low tone, "the power of an endless life."

Then they all went in, and Little Pendleton lay quite empty in the sunshine. After a very short while, however, Sunday-school children began to emerge in groups of three or four in bright Sunday dresses, young men lounged along, girls tripped forth to meet them. Later, sober married couples took a turn across the fields.

Peggy, flying along at the close of Sunday school, talked first to one and then to another, eager, interested, keen to hear all that concerned them.

"Ellen really better? Oh, I'm so glad," she said to a fat woman in blue, her cheeks flushing with pleasure. Then to another in plum colour: "Tom's leg not healing? Oh, we must have the doctor to-morrow," and her broad, white forehead wrinkled anxiously.

Little Pendleton parish considered the Rectory people mean in the way of port wine and jellies and coals, which had flowed freely during the long reign of a predecessor with private means, but, in spite of all, they loved Peggy, because she loved them.

Sharp little Miss Batten, the dressmaker, who was a chapel-body, and had not much patience with the county clergy, made an exception in favour of the Rector,

because of her affection for Peggy. She paused now on her way home to tea and said, as if the hedges had ears:

"The going-away gown on Monday. Can you finish the lace under-blouse?"

"Oh, yes."

She nodded like a mysterious robin, and then said in quite another tone:

"Beautiful service this morning, I hear. It's nice of you not to take it amiss about me going to chapel, Miss Peggy, but in the Church of England you only seem to have to sit still and get saved. I like to take more of a hand in it myself. Active temperament, I s'pose?" And she trudged away purposefully.

Peggy went on through the garden and heard vague sniffing sounds from the direction of the tool-house. Looking in, she saw Jack seated on a wheelbarrow with his back towards her and his shoulders hunched up like a despairing blackbird.

"Why, Jack!"

No answer.

"What is it?"

"Nothing. Can't a feller ever want a bit of quiet," said Jack fiercely. "Go away."

"Coming in to tea?"

"No. Don't want any."

Peggy asked no more questions, but went away and returned a few minutes later with a large piece of cake and a mug of milk in her hands, which she placed in a tempting position on the wheelbarrow. Then she sat down on a box and began to sort seeds.

Jack glanced at the cake, then at Peggy. She was absorbed in her seeds. He wiped his eyes with his knuckles, took a bite or two of cake, and felt a little better; took a drink of milk, and felt comparatively himself.

"Decent cake!" he said gruffly.

"Um," said Peggy. "Soda-cake. It did rise pretty well."

A pause; the cake was finished.

"I say—aren't you going to have your tea?"

"Plenty of time."

Then it all came out.

"Peggy—they've been laughing at me in this suit you made. I know we're poor. I know I can't have a real, proper bought one. But they see it's cut down from father's, and call, 'Curick!' after me when I go down the street."

"What a shame! Oh, poor old Jackums," cried Peggy, flinging her arms round him.

He fought himself free.

"Leave me alone!" he shouted. "I wish I was a real little rich boy or a real little poor boy. I don't mind being poor. But I hate being a rich boy without any money!"

"It *is* horrid," said Peggy earnestly. "But it comes from being a clergyman's family, Jack. It's bad for me, too, and for poor old Dad. We must all bear it together."

"When I grow up," said Jack fiercely, "I shall be a shepherd, like Bobby Parker's father. I shall be a real poor man."

Peggy sighed.

"It's all such a muddle, Jackums. I don't know whether you ever can." Then she cheered up. "Anyway, you can have a new suit like Bobby Parker's. We'll go to Melbury in the carrier's cart some day and buy it—just you and I. And we'll have pork pie and raspberry-puffs and lemonade for dinner."

"Peg," said Jack, incredulously, "you don't mean it? You're kidding!"

"I'm not," said Peggy. "You wait a bit and you'll see. Now, will you come in to tea?"

"Well, p'raps I could do another snack," said Jack, marching out. "Felt a bit off colour. I dessay it was the heat."

Peggy meekly followed, saying farewell in her mind to the prospect of a new summer hat.

Then evening service, and at last the sunny, flowery Easter Day was over. The Rector came in tired out, as any clergyman must be on the night of Easter Sunday. But he had never felt happier. It was a day that had made up for many discouragements.

Mrs. Hewitt glanced up from her book.

"What is the total amount of the offertory?" she asked eagerly.

"Over three pounds."

But he felt vaguely ashamed that she had to be so eager, and he so thankful. It seemed to dim a little the clear radiance of the day's memories.

CHAPTER VI

MARKET DAY

LITTLE PENDLETON awakes early on market mornings, and as Peggy sat stitching by her window she sensed the hum of a fuller life in the village. Eggs were being packed—butter laid in cool rows in the market baskets—poultry folded in neat cloths—lists for groceries written—gay instructions called from one female member of a household to another; every one feeling, with a jolly stir of the pulses, that something different was going to happen to-day.

Mr. Robinson, the small farmer, had gone by at dawn, driving his red cow before him. Peggy was dressing, and she peered forth, thankful to see that the red cow appeared so well and hearty. She hoped sincerely that it might bring in more than the required ten pounds of Robinson's debt to her father, and then there would be something left over to help the family.

Mr. Hewitt, by an unusual chance, also happened to be looking out at dawn, but when he saw Robinson go past driving the red cow, he felt like a criminal. It seemed dreadful to him that he should be forcing this poor man to sell his last cow to pay a debt to himself.

"My dear!" murmured Mrs. Hewitt from the bed, "what are you doing?"

"Just—just going out for a turn," replied her husband.

But this thoroughly aroused Mrs. Hewitt.

"Turn! At this hour!"

"Fresh air! Hard day yesterday," muttered the Rector, hastily clothing himself.

Then he suddenly realised the futility of it. He had to have the money or be disgraced in the eyes of the parish—and not only he, personally, but the church which he represented. Slowly, dismally, he removed his garments and went back to bed.

* * * * *

Tired but triumphant cart-loads of people returned from Melbury market, wedged together, full of the plain affairs of living, calling out greetings to other cart-loads with a sane and natural jollity.

The Rector with his wife and daughter nodded to many of them from the Torwoods' motor-car which had been sent especially to fetch Mrs. Hewitt to dinner. The hour was still early, so that she could be comfortably installed before the other guests arrived; but all these arrangements were taken by her as a matter of course, she having attained the enviable position of professional invalid to Little Pendleton and district.

Decent people are kind, and all desire at times to exercise their parochial consciences as they do their legs; but it is tiresome and often unprofitable to seek an object for this form of exercise. Therefore, in almost every neighbourhood, you may find a person who has become the accepted medium for such well doing. No one knows why or how they attain their position, for it is not by being unusually noble or brave. Perhaps it is just a gift.

Anyway, whatever it is, Mrs. Hewitt possessed it in unusual measure. The earliest strawberries and peaches were always sent to her, and she had constant relays of the newest and freshest literature.

But her superfluity of this gift or quality seemed to have left the Rector and Peggy with less than their proper

share, for no one ever dreamed of giving them anything.

Perhaps, however, it was partly because Peggy never looked as if she wanted anything. To-night, for instance, she wore a white gown which could not compare, of course, with Ethel Torwood's west-end confection, but which was quite good enough to pass muster. She had made it, with Miss Batten's assistance, from a pattern in a weekly fashion journal, and her slim, erect figure gave it an air of smartness which it did not actually possess. Her thick hair was of the sort which does not need much arrangement, and it lay in neat, burnished waves about her well-shaped head. No one was in the least tempted to be "kind" to Peggy.

She stood in the window laughing with Ethel when her father signed to her from a distance, and she made an excuse to join him.

"Peggy," he said, "did you notice—on the way here?"

"No—what?"

"Robinson—driving his red cow home!"

"Never! Then he has not sold it?"

"No."

The whispered conversation then had to cease because Mr. Torwood came up, pleasantly, pompously genial.

"So glad Mrs. Hewitt felt equal to the effort. The change will do her good," he said. "Wonderful woman! Wonderful woman!"

And it really was wonderful how that invalid lady continued positively to sparkle through the evening, though with a plaintive sparkle like an incandescent street-lamp through a light mist.

Lawry and Tremaine had been also invited, together with a Mr. and Mrs. Branfield Badger—he, thin and with lank, sand-coloured hair and a moustache like a seedy lion—she, fat, round, and expensive-looking. It was a shock to strangers to find out that she was really dull

and austere, while he was a jolly man, inclined to practical jokes. The doctor and a middle-aged spinster called Miss Wilson made up the party.

The food was excellent. The host and Mrs. Hewitt were gallant together, the hostess was a pretty girl, and the services all that could be desired, and yet it remained a dreadfully dull entertainment.

One cause of this lay in the fact that Mr. Hewitt, with the utmost desire to be worth his meat, as the Little Pendleton saying is, could yet not bring his mind to bear upon the topics introduced by his hostess. The red cow obtruded itself between him and everything else, even his dinner, so that Ethel felt at last obliged to remark on his want of appetite.

Lawry, on Ethel's other side, was decently conversational, but his mind was occupied by conjectures about Peggy. He watched her rather absent-minded manner with Tremaine, and felt more puzzled than ever concerning her mysterious fascination for the male of the Little Pendleton district. He was bothered by a thing he could not get to the bottom of, it being usual for him to see quite easily through a stone wall and even a corrugated iron shed on the other side.

If the thing was there—why the dickens couldn't he see it as well as any other man?

But it was the red cow coming between Peggy and her good food which made her so dull, though, being young, her appetite was not greatly affected by the obstruction. And after dinner, when the ladies stood round the drawing-room fire, Mrs. Hewitt felt obliged to rally her daughter gently.

"Really, Peggy dear, one would think you were the invalid and I the happy young girl," she said.

"You are so wonderful, dear Mrs. Hewitt," responded Mrs. Branfield Badger.

"Wonderful indeed!" added Miss Wilson.

"I like to feel that they come to my couch for sunshine," murmured Mrs. Hewitt with her best smile.

Then Miss Wilson drew Peggy to one side and told her what a dear mother she had, and how thankful she ought to be, and Peggy wholeheartedly agreed with her.

"Delightful man, Mr. Lawry," said Miss Wilson, introducing a new topic. "So breezy, don't you think?"

"Oh, very," said Peggy, still dwelling on the red cow.

"And such an amusing party," said Miss Wilson. "Really, it's very pleasant to live in such a neighbourhood, is it not? Mrs. Branfield Badger, too, smart and yet not too smart, if you know what I mean. I was at a most charming tea-party at her house last Friday. Charity and society combined, as one may say—what is called a drawing-room meeting. I greatly enjoyed myself."

Peggy looked at her as she babbled on with eyes that grew wider and more intent.

"You like everybody, you enjoy everything," she said.

"Oh, no, my dear, not everybody. That awful man at Great Pendleton who ill-treats his horses, for instance. But, on the whole, people are so particularly nice—it is such a very pleasant neighbourhood——"

Peggy's thoughts travelled to the ugly brown house where Miss Wilson lived in some poverty now all her numerous brothers and sisters were dead, and she suddenly saw this gushing little woman, at whom she had often laughed with Ethel, in a new light.

Why—Miss Wilson lived always in a fairyland made by her own kindness!

"I love Little Pendleton, too," said Peggy gently.

"Not that I'm not a bit lonely at times, of course," said Miss Wilson, vaguely touched by something in Peggy's tone. "But so many people have to be lonely when they get on in life."

"There is such a lot of loneliness," said Peggy, for

in going about among the poor and old and ill, she had seen how loneliness eats into the heart, even in little, friendly places; and she had imagination enough to guess at the terrible loneliness of great cities.

So she was still looking grave and dull when the men came in from the dining-room, and Lawry walked straight up to the two ladies, absolutely determined to investigate Peggy for himself. *What was the mysterious charm?*

"You seem to have a great many devoted admirers in Little Pendleton," he said, seating himself.

"D'you think so? How nice!" said Miss Wilson, taking the remark to herself. "Oh! I see Miss Torwood wants me to play at Bridge."

"She actually thought I meant her!" said Lawry.

"You very easily might," said Peggy with spirit. "We all love Miss Wilson."

"Oh, well," he laughed good-humouredly, "I'm quite ready to love her too, you know. I feel in a mood to love my neighbours to-night."

"That's a good thing," said Peggy, rising. "But I hope you feel inclined for your duty towards your neighbour, too, for I see they want another Bridge player to make up the table."

"One commandment at a time, Miss Peggy," said Lawry. "It's a long time since I was at Sunday school and you must go slow."

The "Miss Peggy" was not altogether to the young lady's taste, but she saw Tremaine walk up to the Bridge table and offer himself for the vacant place and so sat down again. If he preferred playing Bridge with Ethel to talking with her—let him!

"You make me out an awful prig, Mr. Lawry," she said, smiling very sweetly upon her companion.

He smiled back at her, rubbing his chin.

"That's just where it is; I can't make you out at all."

"Goodness!" She smiled again, really amused this time. "I'm simple if ever a girl was; I've no time to be anything else."

"Working in the parish, I suppose?"

"Oh, that amongst other things," said Peggy, rather warming towards him because of his obvious interest in her. "I have all sorts of jobs to do, from digging potatoes to taking a mothers' meeting."

Lawry glanced at her hands, browned and hardened a little, but very finely shaped and delicate. Her neck was slender and round, and her head well poised—her thick hair made lovely shadows.

"Our potatoes are coming on well this year," continued Peggy serenely.

"Oh!" said Lawry, awaking from his contemplation. "Oh, yes, potatoes, of course—highly indigestible!"

Peggy glanced at him, slightly surprised.

"I hope you're not troubled——"

"No! No!" He was thoroughly alert now. "Thankful to say I have excellent health. No more aches and pains than I had at twenty. But some people think a man must be middle-aged because he's made a fortune. I am a young man still."

"Of course," said Peggy politely.

"Talking of age," said Lawry, "I was greatly struck by that old retainer of yours—Stocks, I think they call him. He spoke so charmingly of you."

"Stocks!" said Peggy.

"It is quite delightful," pursued Lawry, "to come across a man, in these modern days, who speaks in such high terms of his young mistress."

"Stocks!" repeated Peggy. "Well, I never!" and she began to laugh.

"You didn't expect it," said Lawry, surprised.

"I must own I hardly did," Peggy acknowledged.

Then Tremaine, being dummy that round, strolled

across to speak to them. It was one thing to make up his mind that no possible advantage could be gained by spending the evening with Peggy and quite another to see Lawry doing it. He did not want her, himself—that was quite certain; but he certainly thought her too good for Lawry, even though the fellow were possessed of all the grocers' shops in the United Kingdom.

He remarked, therefore, over Lawry's head:

"You've never been to see those pigs, Peggy!"

"Now," said Peggy to Lawry, "you get an insight into the simple pleasures of Little Pendleton."

"I'm very adaptable," said Lawry. "When may I come to see your pigs?"

"Tremaine!" called Branfield Badger from the Bridge table. And soon after that Mrs. Hewitt rose to go, Ethel whispering in Peggy's ear on the way upstairs:

"Thought you didn't care for Lawry!"

"No more I do," answered Peggy.

"Funny way of showing dislike," said Ethel.

"Well, I don't *dis*like him," admitted Peggy.

"I thought not," said Ethel.

Nothing more of a private nature passed between the young ladies, and, amid the congratulations of the entire party upon her wonderful fortitude, Mrs. Hewitt entered the waiting car. As it moved off she turned with a sprightly air to her husband and daughter. "How dull you two are! I'm sure I don't know why my family always elects to be depressed when I feel a little more cheerful than usual."

"I'm sorry if I spoilt your pleasure, dear," said Mr. Hewitt gently. "Very sorry. I did make an effort, but to tell the truth I was feeling a little depressed and seedy this evening."

"It always happens so," sighed Mrs. Hewitt in a resigned way. "If I am a trifle better some one always is indisposed. It seems hard."

"Poor Mother! You're tired out," said Peggy, wrapping the shawls closer. "I will make you some Benger's Food as soon as we get in."

"A cup of tea and a small sandwich, dear, I think," said Mrs. Hewitt plaintively. "I do feel a little overdone now it is all over. As the doctor often tells me, I live on my nerves." And with this they stopped at their own door, where Mary came forth, blinking sleepily, but patting her hair because of the smart chauffeur.

"Mr. Robinson called to see you, sir," she said as she bolted the front door. "He left a message. He hasn't sold his red cow—couldn't get a bid for it."

"Robinson's red cow!" said Mrs. Hewitt, still with a trace of her sparkling party manner. "What will they trouble you with next, James?"

The Rector and Peggy glanced at each other and found no reply.

"I expect Miss Batten will be coming next to say she has lost a needle," continued Mrs. Hewitt, feeling rather witty. Then she glanced back at the other two. "Really! One would think you begrudged me this small pleasure——"

"Oh, Mother!" said Peggy.

"I've got the kettle on," suggested Mary from the background. And as the two girls stood over the fire, while the mice scrambled behind the wainscot of the great, bare rectory kitchen, she added indulgently:

"Bein' ill and getting on in life makes anybody a bit cranky. You and me would be 'oly terrors, Miss Peggy, if we was to lie on a sofa all day long and eat and drink and do nothing."

So Mrs. Hewitt had her tea and went to bed, and soon the Rectory lay in darkness amid its dewy gardens. But two men in Little Pendleton could not sleep, the Rector and Robinson. They dozed now and then, to awake startled, and to search again with aching minds

for a way out which did not exist. They had none of the dignity of sorrow to support them, and it seems foolish to use for their case the same word, tragedy, which is employed for all the noble griefs of mankind.

And yet the unseen tragedy of thousands of men's lives is to lie in the dark, so, and wonder what will happen to their wives and children.

CHAPTER VII

A LETTER

MRS. HEWITT took breakfast in her room as usual. Jack had gone off to school, and the two remaining members of the family sat at a round table near a window which opened upon the lawn. Stocks, at his leisure, propelled the garden mower across the short grass. A crow called above the church tower.

"You would think," said Peggy, after a long silence, "that nobody could be bothered here. Oh, dear, only butchers are vile!"

"You can not blame Dunn," said Mr. Hewitt heavily. "I must go and ask him for a few more days' grace while I see what can be arranged. But I gave my word of honour. It is inexpressibly painful——"

He flushed all over his fine-skinned, delicate face and rose from the table.

"Postman coming," said Stocks, pausing to give the information from the lawn. "A bit ago I saw the sweep go by. That's the best of Little Pendleton. There's always a lot going on in Little Pendleton."

Mr. Hewitt stepped out into the sunlight and called to the postman, who had taken the short-cut across the churchyard.

"You can bring the letters this way, Williams."

Stocks advanced to take the budget over the hedge, while the postman remarked genially:

"See you've got company coming!"

Stocks also read the post-card, which lay uppermost, and replied carelessly:

"Oh, yes; only for tea, though."

Then a registered letter was receipted, and the man went blithely on his way.

It is, when you come to think of the matter, a special mercy that postmen are so jollily detached and remain unaffected by the constant bringing of joy and sorrow and hope and despair to people's front doors for years together. Otherwise they would be as difficult to obtain as executioners. So the Little Pendleton postman pursued his round unconcernedly, while the Rector took the letters—glanced at the directions—opened them——

Then he called sharply:

"Peggy!"

"Yes, Father!"

He put out a trembling hand and pulled her down beside him, pointing to the two crisp five-pound notes which had come enclosed in the registered letter.

"What is it, Father?" urged Peggy.

"It is the Providence of God," said the Rector.

Peggy held her father's hand tightly in her own. It seemed appropriate to both that a lark should at that moment fly up from Tremaine's field to the gate of heaven, singing.

"I'm so thankful!" said Peggy, after that little pause. "But where did it come from?"

"Well," said the Rector, "I think I may partly congratulate myself on this happy solution. Being a man of the world, I mentioned that, should our negotiations prove satisfactory—should they, mind, for I know how requisite caution is in dealing with these up-to-date business firms—I would consent to my name being placed on the circulars. The instant response is a couple of five-pound notes, merely as a guarantee of good faith. I have to sign a formal acknowledgment, of course, and I shall repay the amount as soon as

Robinson sells his cow. But one comes to think one is shelved in a place like this sometimes, and such recognition is gratifying. I must own, apart from the money, that I feel gratified."

Mr. Hewitt seldom made so long a speech, but the sudden revulsion of feeling after a sleepless night had caused him to become a little garrulous; but his hand still shook so that he could scarcely gather the papers together before taking them into the house.

"Time for matins," he said. "I see Stocks has just gone to ring the bell."

So Peggy fetched her hat, and together the two walked across the garden and the green, flowery churchyard. At the door of the porch Mr. Hewitt stood still and looked round at the glistening beauty of the morning.

"Oh! All ye works of the Lord, praise ye the Lord!" he said, then paused, seeming as if he were going to speak further, and finally went in without any more words, for he found a great difficulty in speaking about religion to his family. A sort of shyness would seize him of which he was afterwards bitterly ashamed.

Immediately after morning service the Rector and his daughter, with a sort of morning radiance about them both, went down the lane between the budding hedgerows to see Robinson.

"Poor fellow! I know the sort of night he will have had," said Mr. Hewitt. "We must go and tell him to take time—to take time. A nice fellow, Robinson!"

The Rector had always been, unconsciously, and with the very kindest intentions, a little aloof from his parishioners, and his feeling for Robinson was now quite different from any he had before entertained for that hard-working farmer. He and Robinson no longer called to each other across a distance filled with vague generalities; they were standing close, looking each other in the eye as man to man. He would have been in-

tensely grieved and shocked had any one told him so, but he had actually never before supposed that he and Robinson could be thinking and feeling the same in the night.

The man came out of the cow stable as they crossed the yard, and as he greeted them the corner of his mouth twitched nervously. Peggy noticed that twitching and said impulsively, before her father could get the words out:

"It's all right about the cow. We only came to say it was all right."

The man turned red and then pale; his nerves were all out of tune with overwork and anxiety.

"I haven't had a wink of sleep," he said stupidly. "I never meant to go back on you, but I couldn't get a bid for her. Only giving her away. I haven't had a wink of sleep."

And he never could understand why the Rector then shook hands with him a second time, saying in an odd, jerky way most unlike his usually dignified manner: "I knew it! I knew it! But we're all right now."

He did, however, feel a warmth of sympathy and human understanding which had not often come into his bleak, hard life, though he only blurted out in reply:

"I'll pay you—if I live I will!"

"It's more if the cow lives," laughed Peggy, but her own eyes were wet.

Then the Rector went home and Peggy ran upstairs to see the new baby, who had already performed the sweet, eternal miracle of turning an unwonted expense into a jealously guarded treasure.

"You've come about the money," said the poor woman, staring anxiously from the pillows where it was pleasant to rest a while, and let some one else work or leave the work undone, in spite of all the worry.

"No. No. Something's happened. My father can manage without it," said Peggy.

Then Robinson could be heard tramping across the house in his great farm boots, and he called up the stairs:

"Rector's been! It's all right, Missus!"

"Oh, Mr. Robinson," cried Peggy, running out to the top of the stairs with the child in her arms. "Oh, what a dear baby!"

The man's face softened.

"Aye—she's a nice little lass," he said, tramping off out again.

And Peggy returned to the bedroom and put the baby gently down by the tired mother, her girl's heart touched by the mystery and beauty of marriage and parenthood. But she saw that the thin dressing-jacket was not sufficiently warm for a northern April day, and longed to substitute another. These were the kind of poor whom nobody helped. She found it so dreadfully hard to have nothing to give.

"I'm bringing you a custard," she said, offering all she had. "You like my custards, Mrs. Robinson."

Tears of weakness came into the woman's eyes, and she took Peggy's slim young hand in her work-worn one.

"I hate all custards," she replied, "but people may say what they like about you, Miss Peggy, I shall always maintain you mean well."

Peggy smiled and kissed the baby softly and came away, not at all disconcerted, because she was used to this attitude on the part of the parishioners of Little Pendleton. She had, at least, no opportunity to become too self-righteous, or to pose in her own eyes as the parish angel.

At midday Jack came home with a broad grin on

his face, and his pocket bulged with sweets from the village shop.

"See that?" he said, drawing his sister into a secluded corner near the hen-house, and tapping the protuberance. "A whole shillin's worth! *Now,* what price Bobby Parker?"

"What are you talking about?" said Peggy, who was gathering eggs in haste. "Bobby Parker is a horrid boy!"

"I say, Peg, just you get a few more young men. Charley Tremaine, string on Sunday—Mr. Lawry, almond rock this morning—but I do wish you'd get one that'd go a real buster for you. I'm simply dying for a new wheel-barrow."

"Mr. Lawry's giving you sweets has nothing at all whatever to do with me," said Peggy with dignity. "Go in and wash your hands. They're simply filthy!"

"You always pounce down on a feller about bits of him being grubby if you want to get the best of it," said Jack, glaring at his sister. "I don't know how it is that girls keep so beastly clean." Then he added over his shoulder as a parting shot, "I told Lawry you'd be pleased to have him to tea this afternoon. He asked me, and I said, 'Yes,' and he said did you often have gentlemen to tea, and I said dozens, and they generally brought choc'lates with them. So I did you a good turn, too, Miss Peg, though you didn't deserve it. And I hope he'll remember the chocs."

"Oh, Jack, how could you!" groaned Peggy, standing still with her basket half full of eggs.

Jack made a sort of circular rush at one of the hens, and replied carelessly:

"Anyway, I'm glad I gave him the hint. Maybe he'll bring a whole eighteen-penny box with a lady outside. They say the chap's as rich as a carcase."

Then, whistling a popular air, he walked away.

Peggy followed, half laughing and half angry, but more sorry than either. Poor little Jack, she thought, if only he could go to a decent preparatory school.

At four o'clock Lawry duly arrived without the chocolates, but bearing a few choice flowers and some early strawberries.

"How kind! How good!" murmured Mrs. Hewitt. "But every one spoils me. Peggy, dear, perhaps if you could take the tops off and find a little cream, I might enjoy a few now. I know Mr. Lawry would like to see me enjoy a few now. And how do you like Little Pendleton?" she continued, daintily tasting her fruit.

"I like the place," said Lawry, "but the people want waking up. They suffer from lack of competition. Nobody uses the wits they have, here. Why, an ordinary office boy could turn 'em all inside out."

"Ah!" said Mrs. Hewitt vaguely, sugaring another berry.

"Competition," pursued her guest, crossing his legs, "is what has made me what I am."

"Has it *indeed?*" said Mrs. Hewitt intensely.

"Upon my word," said Lawry, deeply interested in his own conversation, "I shouldn't care much for a thing that nobody else wanted. I started a comparatively rich man, and I chiefly liked getting more and more businesses because I had to fight for every one with local conditions and tradesmen already established. But I've had enough of that now—it's always the same."

"You'll be spoiling for a fresh conquest of some kind," said Peggy.

He looked at her intently, half smiling.

"Yes—I dare say I shall——"

Mrs. Hewitt put down her plate.

"So delicious. By the way, Mr. Lawry, speaking of business and competition, and so on, it always seems a

pity to me that poor Charley Tremaine has not more of your spirit."

"Well, his life certainly wouldn't suit me—bank counter all day and grubbing in a back yard morning and night," agreed Lawry. "But he's one of the born plodders!"

"He's not!" said Peggy, sitting very erect. "He was the straightest rider and the best shot in the county for his age when Miss Tremaine's affairs suddenly went wrong, and it was the dream of his life to be an airman. I think there's as much adventure in that as getting more grocers' shops."

"Peggy!" gasped Mrs. Hewitt.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Lawry," said Peggy, with an exceedingly red face.

"It's a great grief to me," said Mrs. Hewitt, touching her eyes lightly with her handkerchief, "that my daughter should have such exceedingly bucolic manners. It comes from her associating so much with the village people. I often beg her not to be always in and out of the cottages, but it is of no use. I am sure she did not mean to be impolite, Mr. Lawry."

He laughed, though his face also had deepened beyond its normal hue.

"It's all right. I understand that she and Mr. Tremaine are great friends. I ought to have remembered."

"Why," said Mrs. Hewitt, peering through her own special window in search of a diversion, "here *is* Charley Tremaine. How odd, at this time of day, and still in his town attire! I hope Miss Tremaine is not ill. He has no time for afternoon calls, as a rule, poor fellow!"

Thus, gently babbling, she tided over the awkward interlude, and Tremaine entered to find a pleasantly chatting and harmonious party.

"We've been talking," said Mrs. Hewitt in her sweet-

est voice, "of the dearth of opportunities in Little Pendleton. Mr. Lawry was saying how wasted you were here, Charley."

"Very good of him," said Tremaine, sitting down, "but I'm afraid I've got to go on being wasted. By the way, Mrs. Hewitt, one of the lads brought me some plovers' eggs that he found down by Mallerby Marsh. They are the first, so I thought perhaps you might be able to fancy them." Then his eye fell on Lawry's strawberries, and he grinned, being not without a sense of humour. He had an instant picture of himself and Lawry driving bullocks up to a primitive kraal, whacking hard to see which would get there first, and of Peggy peering over the figure of a lady scantily attired in skins.

"How kind!" murmured Mrs. Hewitt, and he returned to the clouded amenities of modern courtship.

But he had seen plainly, as in a flash of sudden, mental light, that he and Lawry were rivals. He could not marry Peggy. He was not even certain that he wanted to marry her. But he was hanged if he was going to let Lawry.

He did not put the matter so definitely to himself, but such was his indefensible train of reasoning, even while he said agreeably to the other man:

"I hope your young pheasants are going on well. Just the weather for 'em!"

"All right, thanks," said Lawry, rising. "By the way, Tremaine, if you ever should think of chucking the bank, come to me. I have lots of irons in the fire. I dare say I can do something for you."

"Thank you," said Tremaine rather coldly. Then the more generous side of his nature forced him to add: "It's very good of you, Lawry!"

"Well," admitted Lawry, with, it must be owned, rather the grand air, "I don't throw offers of that kind

about as a rule, of course." And he took his leave of the ladies.

But when Tremaine returned from accompanying him to the front door, the atmosphere of the drawing-room had entirely changed. Mrs. Hewitt lay back upon the sofa holding a smelling bottle, and she begged him in a faint voice to excuse her talking, as she was a little overdone.

"Come into the garden," said Peggy, throwing a light shawl over the invalid's feet. "Mother will be all right if she has a little quiet."

"But she was all right a minute ago," said Tremaine. "How odd!"

"Oh, no, she is often like that when company goes," said Peggy. "Poor Mother, she enjoys the change, but it tires her!"

"Then she doesn't consider me company," said Tremaine.

"Of course not; you belong to the family," said Peggy; then she suddenly blushed, remembering what Stocks had said, and felt furious with herself for being so ridiculous. "You always have seemed like one of us," she added, determined to be sensible.

"A sort of brother," said Tremaine, looking down at her.

"Yes—only with the plain speaking left out. The very nicest kind of brother," said Peggy.

"Well, you can reserve your sisterly feelings for Jack —and Lawry," said Tremaine.

"Certainly—if you don't want them," laughed Peggy.

"I don't. By the way, are you coming to see my pigs to-night? That's what I wanted to ask."

The sudden change in his tone made Peggy instinctively turn round to seek a cause for it, and she saw Stocks, holding his cheek beneath the lilac tree.

"Hope I don't introod. I was on'y waiting a bit. I'm in a nagony——"

"What do you want?" said Peggy.

"Whiskey," said Stocks. "To put it plain, and no beating about the bush, I want a drop of whiskey to put in this 'ere tooth. I'm a teetotler since that wedding —but with toothache like mine the drink question's between a man and his tooth and his Maker. Nobody else hasn't no right to intervene."

"Come along with me," said Tremaine good-naturedly.

Peggy glanced up at him standing there in the strong light. How nice he was, with his pleasant smile, and tall, loose-limbed figure, and lean face lined more than usual at his age, particularly round his rather deep-set grey eyes. He bore the unmistakable signs of a strong will keeping in leash an adventurous, ardent temperament, though Peggy did not see this, of course.

"I'll follow you in a few minutes," she said. "I must just go in to Mother first."

So Tremaine and Stocks plodded away silently across the field; but when they reached the farm gate, gratitude moved the sexton to say, still holding his cheek:

"I shouldn't show her the pigs, sir. There isn't nothing to be gotten out o' pigs. Now birds in their little nests—or aught o' that sort—but you can't go on from pigs."

Tremaine started, stared at Stocks, frowned, and then began to laugh. But he made no direct reply. "Sit down here a minute, and I'll bring the whiskey," he said, indicating a sunny bench by the stable wall.

"Only a thimbleful!" said Stocks. But a few minutes later he returned alone over the field muttering to himself: "It was a bairn's thimble. That's what it was. A bairn's thimble!"

Peggy, encountering him, said sympathetically:

"Feeling better?"

"Aye—a bit."

"Did Mr. Tremaine give you the whiskey?"

"He may have," said Stocks, "or he may have let the glass look at the whiskey bottle before it came out. I don't know. I aren't sure. And after me giving him the tip about the pigs. Ongrateful feller. Ongrateful feller!"

He plodded on again, still muttering, until he came to the churchyard hedge, above which he could see Mr. Hewitt walking slowly home in the sunshine. The Rector wore such a look of quiet thankfulness that even Stocks noticed it, in spite of the toothache, and wondered what could have happened to make his master feel so happy.

CHAPTER VIII

THE RED COW

MISS TREMAINE came out of the house to greet her nephew as Peggy entered the garden gate.

"Oh! How d'you do, Peggy? Charley, Mr. Robinson has been inquiring for you. Where have you been? I waited tea."

"I went out calling," said Tremaine rather self-consciously. "What do you think of that for dissipation?"

"Calling! Oh, well, you have a perfect right to pay calls if you like. You work hard enough, I'm sure. Where did you go?"

"To the rectory," said Tremaine. "It seemed so long since I had paid a state visit to Mrs. Hewitt."

"Oh!" said Miss Tremaine. Then, abruptly, to Peggy, "And how is your mother to-day?"

"Not very well. We dined at the Torwoods' last night, and that was rather much for her," said Peggy, "though they sent the car."

"Um! Mrs. Hewitt certainly enjoys weak health," was Miss Tremaine's enigmatic comment as she tramped up the path. No offerings went from her to the distinguished invalid on the Rectory sofa, and Mrs. Hewitt considered the spinster soured by adversity instead of softened by it, as she ought to have been; and sometimes she included her neighbour in her prayers, with the subconscious knowledge that this pious act would annoy Miss Tremaine intensely if she were only aware of it.

"I'm going to show Peggy my poultry," interposed Tremaine hastily.

"Pigs," said Peggy.

"I suppose either'll do equally well," barked Miss Tremaine over her shoulder. "Well, go down to Robinson's, if you can, when this agricultural show is over. His cow is ill and he's sent for a vet., but in the meantime you might do something."

"The red cow!" cried Peggy. "Oh, go now, Charley, at once!"

"Perhaps it's not so urgent," hesitated Tremaine.

"It is! It is!" said Peggy. "I don't know what in the world will happen if that red cow dies."

And as they went across the field together, Tremaine said tenderly: "Dear old Pegs. You feel for every man-jack in Little Pendleton as if it were yourself. You'll wear your heart out before you're old if you go on like this."

Peggy shook her head, but was obliged to accept the unearned tribute, being quite unable to explain all the circumstances. Then she saw her father still in the garden, and ran across to tell him about the cow, but something in his serene aspect made her hesitate, and she at last decided to keep the matter of the red cow's indisposition to herself until the next morning.

During the night, however, she awakened several times, and always there was a little light shining through the trees from the half-door of Robinson's cow-house. It was still dark when she rose to sew by candle-light, for Gladys Wakefield's wedding grew very near now, and there remained still a pile of unmade garments in Miss Batten's back room. As she sewed, she kept glancing through the budding branches which began to show faintly against the beginning of the dawn. At last she put down her work and crept softly downstairs and out into the morning, feeling that she must know what had

happened during the long night. As she neared the cow-house she heard the sound of a bucket clinking and men tramping across the cobbled floor.

"Well, we've done our best, Robinson," said Tremaine.

"Aye, sir. You've been very good," said Robinson dully. "Will you come in and have anything?"

"No, thank you. I must get off to my own work," said Tremaine. Then, without offering any words of meaningless consolation, he nodded and walked on. Robinson, his whole body expressing beaten-out weariness, trudged into the house. Peggy stayed for a minute or two under the shadow of a haystack and then came forward to meet Tremaine.

"The cow's dead?" she said.

"Yes. Got a chill going to market. They sometimes do."

He did not seem in the least surprised to see her there, and indeed his whole mind for the moment was taken up by thoughts of the man he had just left. "It's a burning shame that nothing is done for the little farmer," he said fiercely. "The man who toils his heart out and never has a chance. Peggy, if only I were rich, I'd give all the time and money and talent I had to helping the class Robinson belongs to. I'd live for that alone and give the Government no peace until something was done. The rest all talk. These work on—moiling themselves into the grave—inarticulate!" Then he did begin to realise that his companion was out at a somewhat unusual hour. "I say—how did you come here?"

"Oh! I happened to be up and about," she answered vaguely.

The sun was rising now over Great Pendleton woods, the birds chirped in the hedgerows, the tired young faces were turned to each other in a pearly light of very early morning. Tremaine and Peggy both belonged to the great brotherhood of those who work, not for an occu-

pation, but to earn a daily wage. Though neither spoke of this, some inner sense of it drew them humanly near to one another without any thought of love-making.

"Peggy," said Tremaine suddenly, "you look tired. You're always stitching at your window in the early morning. I shall have to speak to Mrs. Hewitt or the Rector about it."

Peggy flushed crimson.

"Oh, you mustn't do that, Charley! Promise me you won't!" she exclaimed.

He smiled down at her, the little lines round his own tired eyes showing very clearly in the white light. Peggy thought she had never seen him look so kind.

"I can't have you getting sober and faded, too," he said. "What should we do without our jolly Peggy of Little Pendleton?"

But she saw that a serious purpose underlay his light words, and said quietly:

"You don't know the harm you would do by interfering!"

"Interfering! Oh, of course, if you see it in that light——"

"But I don't!" cried Peggy, half crying, for even her fine health was a little tried by the short nights which such early rising entailed. "Only I sew for Miss Batten to earn money—and she pays me every Saturday night—and if Mother knew, she'd—I don't know what she would do—and poor Father would feel hurt and humiliated for ever because he couldn't keep me on a silk cushion sewing a silk seam only just when I felt inclined! Look at my forefinger!" She held it out. "The lemons and things I use, and yet it will get scrubby. I'm turning into a deceitful girl over it all, and yet I so wanted to help."

Tremaine touched the roughened forefinger gently.

"Poor old Pegs! Dear old Pegs!" Then he suddenly lifted it to his lips. "I won't tell, dear."

They walked along rather soberly after that, and parted with a casual nod, as usual, but when Peggy went into the kitchen to make herself a cup of tea, her eyes shone very brightly. The red cow was dead—the world was full of trouble—and yet there seemed an exhilaration in the air; she thought it was the dewy freshness of the morning.

CHAPTER IX

A MARKET DAY

THIS secret joy continued to shine through all the troubles of Peggy's daily round and filled her life just then with a sort of rainbow glamour. The carrier's cart in which she and Jack rode to Melbury market became, to all intents and purposes, a chariot in a fairy tale, while the pumpkin faces of the women seated round seemed ready at any moment to change into something kind and fascinating and unexpected.

But Jack did not, of course, share this fairy-tale feeling, because it only comes once, at the beginning of young love. So he put out his tongue at a fat girl with striped stockings, who responded by rolling her eyes hideously, and wished the journey were over.

Clip! Clop! Clop! Clop!

Even Peggy was forced to see plain truth through her rainbow haze at last, and to realise that her companions were unusually silent. A brief remark about butter or a carefully phrased allusion to the crops alone punctuated the dull, endless clopping of the horse-shoes on the hard road. And the cart usually so hummed and clacked as it went along that the bees and poultry in the farm-yards might have thought a company of distinguished relatives were going in state to Melbury market.

Peggy came out of her dreams, and took genuine interest in the butter, and was concerned about the crops, but she met with no encouragement. Dull politeness and a veiled resentment that Rector's daughters should ride

in carrier's carts formed the only response. Peggy's eyes began to shine and she sat very erect in the wobbling cart, subconsciously making up her mind to turn this into a jolly progress after all. But how was it to be done? She glanced quickly from one compressed mouth and heavy face to another, thinking hard. Then with a little flush of sudden illumination she leaned forward, saying earnestly to her opposite neighbour:

"Do you know any cure for a cold in the head?"

And it is a fact that, from that moment, the carrier's cart never ceased to resound with vital, eager, interested conversation. Even the fat girl gave up rolling her eyes at Jack in order to remark that she always took camphor on a lump of sugar, and there is reason to believe that every known cold-cure, from treacle-posset onwards, was canvassed with intense partisanship before the old horse turned the familiar corner into Melbury High Street.

The passengers all alighted together in the cobbled inn-yard flushed, voluble, pleased with themselves and life, and the most pleased of all was Peggy. It was something, at any rate, to have started with a jolly journey, and the young Hewitts made their way out past burly farmers and rosy farmers' wives and gaily dressed daughters into the bustle of the market square, knowing that the world was a fine place and they lucky to be alive in it.

Behind them followed the six matrons, two spinsters, and the fat girl, who had filled the carrier's cart. Said one:

"What a talker she is! But I thought I'd let her run on!"

"Aye, it seemed to please her, poor lass! But I'm afraid she's too much talk for Mr. Lawry. Men don't like so much talk in a girl they want to marry."

"We might give her a hint on the way back," said

Young Mrs. Taylor anxiously. "That's Mr. Lawry's car standing there. I should like to see her riding in her own car."

"But if she doesn't love him——" suggested the fat girl who had a romantic interior.

"Love!" exclaimed the six matrons, all at once, and the parent added sharply: "Of course she'd love him if he gave her a beautiful house and fine motor-car. Pull up your stockings at once and don't talk nonsense!"

"If it was me, I'd rather have Mr. Charley Tremaine," said the fat girl stubbornly.

"Phyllis!" warned her mother.

"I *would* rather have Mr.——" repeated the fat girl, draggling on behind.

"Look here!" said the exasperated mother, standing still. "I hope you'll get somebody that uses the strap to you when you don't behave—that's what I hope."

"No, Mother," said the girl, beginning to whimper, "I want to be like you; *I* want to be the one that does the hitting."

Then Mother gave up an unequal contest, and followed the other women into the bustle and sunshine, where windows gleamed fresh-garnished for market day, and Peggy and Jack already stood fascinated before a draper's emporium in which boys' and ladies' clothes were displayed together.

A slight shadow fell for a moment across the radiance of Peggy's mood as she averted her longing gaze from a straw hat trimmed with woodbine, but Jack's joy in purchasing a suit exactly like Bobby Parker's soon made her forget the sacrifice of a new summer hat, and it would have been hard to find a happier couple in England than the Rector's son and daughter when they sat down at last to lemonade, pork pie and raspberry puffs.

The Rector was himself in Melbury that day, having

driven over with his church warden, Mr. Wakefield, but he looked dull and preoccupied when he came into the confectioner's shop for a cup of tea and some bread and butter. He did not notice one or two people who said "Good day," and when Jack hailed him, he started and stood still for a minute, as if he scarcely knew what he was doing.

"Tired, Father?" said Peggy as he sat down.

"No, no! Jack, go and choose your cakes or what-not." Then he turned to his daughter and said in a low voice: "I have been to the bank and I find my account is much more overdrawn than I thought. Those people in London write reasonably and pleasantly enough, but I should like to have had the matter settled. Only it does not seem possible—it does not seem feasible."

"What shall we do, Father?" said Peggy, and something in her voice, reflecting the sudden drop from her happy mood, caused the Rector to remember for once that she was only a young girl after all.

"Oh, we shall manage," he answered, speaking more cheerfully. "The firm could not have written a nicer letter. They have absolute belief in my good faith and expressed themselves willing to wait for any reasonable period. They are ready to make concessions to me that they would not make to any ordinary layman. It is pleasant to encounter such an attitude towards the Church in these days, Peggy."

"It really is," said Peggy, greatly relieved. "They must be very nice men, Father, though they are money-lenders. We must send them a box of roses when the William Allan Richardson is at its best. Townspeople appreciate little attentions of that kind."

"Well, well, we shall see," said the Rector, "and in the meantime—— Are not you and Jack lunching a little extravagantly?"

"It is my own money," said Peggy quickly. "I have not asked Mother for any."

"Clever little manager!" he said, rising. "You always seem to have something left out of your tiny allowance, Peggy. It is like the widow's cruise of oil."

Then he passed out through the shop where a large number of new chocolate boxes were arranged on the counter. He glanced at them wistfully, wishing he could buy one. It was very bitter to him, just then, that he could never be the one to give pleasures to his children.

Half an hour later, Peggy and Jack followed him, and as they walked along the street they could hear Lawry's peculiar motor-horn hooting a way through the loitering groups of people, and immediately its owner caught sight of them, he brought it up with a swish and a final hoot to the kerb. There was something vaguely triumphal in this approach which caused the people in the market square to look round with quickened interest, as if they were at a show and saw the Fairy Prince dash up to Cinderella's door on a Golden Coach. True, Lawry was not quite slim enough for his part, but he wore a fine motor coat and his car gleamed, obviously expensive, in the sunshine; he being always ready to pay a high price for a thing he really wanted, and which positively could not be had at a lower rate.

"Hello!" he called. "This is luck! May I give you a lift, Miss Hewitt?"

Then they rushed away through the market square with Peggy's ribbons flying, and the horn hooting, and Jack one universal grin from rakishly-set cap to bootlaces, and such of the onlookers as knew the Rector's daughter even by sight only shouted gaily in their hearts: "Bravo! Peggy! Fifty to one on Peggy of Little Pendleton!"

Nothing of all this was said aloud, of course, but Tremaine, looking over the bank wire-blind, heard and felt it as plainly as if cheers had been raised and flags waved. His natural impulse was to rush forth from those orderly precincts, seize Lawry by the excellent overcoat collar, pitch him into the road, and ride off with the Beloved. Instead, he stood glowering in the bank window with a very red face until recalled to his desk.

As the car passed the confectioner's, Lawry stopped it, bustled into the shop, and returned with one of those boxes of chocolates which Mr. Hewitt had eyed so wistfully earlier in the day. It was not quite the largest, but it was a good, handsome, sufficient box, and Peggy was delighted with it.

"And now for Jack!" said Lawry with a splendid, hang-the-expense air. "What's your fancy, eh, Master Jack? Top? Soldiers?"

Jack glanced from Lawry to his sister, hesitated, and said in a burst:

"I s'pose it wouldn't run to a wheel-barrow?"

Lawry laughed.

"Iron-monger's, James!" he commanded, and the chauffeur brought the car up smoothly on the further side of the Square. Jack winked hideously to Peggy as he went into the shop, and her indignant rose had not quite faded when Ethel Torwood emerged from brass fenders to speak to them.

Lawry was in his element.

"Let me give you a lift, too. The more the merrier," he said gallantly.

"Do!" urged Peggy.

So away they went again, flying past the carrier's cart on the grey outskirts of the town which Peggy had seen advance and recede so slowly in the morning. As the car vanished up the long, flat road, Young Mrs.

Taylor leaned from it and said, with an angry eye on Ethel Torwood: "It's not a wife he wants—it's a narum!"

"What's that?" said the fat girl.

The other ladies did not speak. They agreed with Young Mrs. Taylor, but they thought she was rather free in her talk.

Meanwhile the car slipped in between old-fashioned dog-carts and gigs, and horses pranced, and Peggy called out cheerful greetings, while an occasional farmer, a little market-merry, sang as he jogged along. As they approached Great Pendleton, Tremaine rushed past on his motor-bicycle, wearing the usual scalp-hunting expression common to the mildest young gentlemen employing that mode of transit, intensified to a degree which caused Jack to remark lightly:

"Old Charley looks as if he was out for blood!"

This meeting put an edge upon Lawry's enjoyment of his drive with two of the prettiest and most popular girls in the county. He now felt, gloriously, that, whatever he did, he was bound to come out on top. If it were grocers' shops, he succeeded until success meant nothing; and now, as the young county gentleman, he was already ahead of Tremaine, who had been at the job since the cradle.

But the Rectory gleamed through the trees, the happy travellers alighted, the horn tooted again beyond the end of Rectory Lane, the jaunt was over.

"Well," said Jack, "I feel as if I'd been to heaven with my body on."

"Jack!" said Peggy.

"Well, I do. If I hadn't it on, I shouldn't want wheelbarrows and pork pie. I say, Pegs"—he paused—"that would be your car if you married Lawry, wouldn't it?"

"I suppose so. Don't talk nonsense," said Peggy, gathering her parcels together.

"But he gave me a wheelbarrow," argued Jack, "and when Bobby Parker's sister's young man was going to perpose the very next day he only gave Bobby half-a-crown——"

"That Bobby Parker——" began Peggy severely, then she turned round and saw the little, round, happy face shining over the wheelbarrow, and had not the heart to scold him.

"Look here, Pegs," he continued, "if you can't get a husband with a big motor-car, *I'll* buy you one when I grow up. I'll work and work until I earn the money. You wait and see."

Peggy bent and kissed the eager, upturned face.

"Dear, old Jackums!" she said. "I don't want to get married. I like best being with you and Father and Mother. I want to go on always being Peggy of Little Pendleton."

He pushed her away, firmly though not unkindly, and walked into the house.

"I don't know how it is," he remarked over his shoulder, "but if you say a kind word to a girl, she always wants to kiss you!"

In the hush of evening, with the dew falling on the little gardens, the carrier's cart lumbered through the village. Voices called from open doors through which pleasant firelight glowed. Dogs barked joyfully as empty gigs were backed into coach houses. Little Pendleton was welcoming her children back from the outside world.

"Seen aught fresh to-day?"

"Miss Peggy came home with Mr. Lawry."

"So did Miss Torwood. I doubt she's no chance against Miss Torwood with all that money."

"Well, Little Pendleton's done what it can. There's no blame to Little Pendleton!"

So ran question and answer, while "Good-nights" were

called through the scented darkness, and the cart creaked on again.

At last the carrier himself went to bed. The cart stood silent in the shed at the back of the little red house. Market Day was over.

CHAPTER X

A MAGNATE IN SEARCH OF A WIFE

THERE is a great deal in suggestion, as everybody knows, so this first essay of Little Pendleton in corporate matchmaking may have been instigated by Mr. Lawry's definite desire to find a suitable wife.

He had not arrived at the age of forty-three without being tempted to enter the bonds of matrimony, and one such temptation suffered in his early youth had left him to a certain extent immune: for he had been very deeply in love, according to his lights, with the fluffy-haired daughter of a small wine and spirit merchant. But he saw, through all his ardour, that she was not quite what some people would call a lady, and he crushed down the most real affection of his life with an iron hand.

After a lapse of some years, he chanced to come across her again in a suburb of his native town, grown stout, with obviously false teeth and five rather plain little girls. Since that time, whenever his somewhat warm-blooded temperament threatened to revolt from the calculating side of his nature and cause him to make a matrimonial mistake, he would journey down to that suburb, present the little girls with not too extravagant sweets, and return cured. Best of all, these visits caused his old sweetheart, who had but a drab life of it, to think he remained unmarried for her sake, though she never clearly explained to herself why he had not proposed instead of languishing at a distance while her father's assistant bought the ring.

Anyway, he now came to Little Pendleton with the clear intention of finding a suitable wife, being clever enough to realise that the sort of partner he desired would be more easily found by a man with an established position and a fine house than by one who waited to purchase these things after the wedding.

He wished to found a family; to do his duty to himself, his family and the state, in the order named, and to die at a very distant date, full of riches and honour. But he certainly did not intend to have his marriage arranged by any one else. Tactful dowagers had, indeed, delicately offered their services, but he had always said to himself that when his time came he, and he alone, would do the seeking, finding, and carrying away captive. He had a sort of spirit which made him delight in owing everything to his own energy and cleverness.

Meanwhile, Little Pendleton grew a little worried about Miss Peggy. There was a feeling that she was "going off" in appearance. Anxious eyes scanned her complexion as she went down the street and found it paler than was considered becoming. Her face was certainly thinner.

"She'll be an old maid before you know where you are," said the postmistress to Young Mrs. Taylor.

"Miss Peggy an old maid!" said Young Mrs. Taylor with a scornful laugh. But she added tentatively: "I s'pose they've got to writing to each other!"

"Not so much as a post-card," said the postmistress in a depressed tone. "I've been watching out for weeks."

But the comments at the Blue Lion formed the surest indication of what Little Pendleton was really feeling. During the evening after the motor-drive, the landlord was ready to lay twenty to one on Peggy's chances, but it must be owned that he had also been to market, and therefore perhaps viewed life a little optimistically. At

the present moment, he was still ready to back his favourite, but more from the sporting instinct common to his order than from any certainty of success.

Thus in the bar—but in the tap-room, also, the matter sometimes came up for discussion. Stocks, who never exceeded his single glass of mild ale, excepting at weddings, sat puff, puffing at the long clay pipe which he was the last man to smoke in Little Pendleton.

"There's that Mr. Charley Tre-maine," he said. "Ongrateful feller! I doubt she may have an eye on him."

"With Mr. Lawry ready? She won't be soft enough for that sure-ly!" said another.

"Lassies is soft enough for anything," said a third, reaching the pewter spittoon in the corner with a dexterity born of long practice.

Then the three old men smoked upon that until it was time to turn out into the starlight and go home down the village street where, it being May, the tulips were now in flower.

Peggy, herself, was too busy to give much attention to her own private affairs, for the following Tuesday was Gladys Wakefield's wedding, and she had been sewing every spare moment of the day and night. On this particular day, Mrs. Hewitt had been very exacting, and it was after ten o'clock before Peggy could slip up the street with her finished work to Miss Batten's house.

"There!" she said, sinking down upon a seat in the familiar little back room. "That's all, I think!"

"Come, that's splendid," said Miss Batten.

"Well," said Peggy wearily, "Gladys is getting a husband who won't know whether she wears a sack with a hole in it or a satin gown, by the time the honeymoon is over."

Miss Batten laughed. She had been working hard since dawn too, but she looked as apple-cheeked and jolly as ever.

"All husbands are like that," she said. "It's only the question of a longer or shorter time. What I hate," she added, "is that all husbands, even the meekest and humblest, think they haven't to keep it up at all—that's the woman's business."

"I wish there were not such a thing as marrying," said Peggy, staring at the floor.

"When a girl says a thing like that she wants a cup of tea and a talk," said Miss Batten briskly, "and when a man does, he wants a smoke and leaving alone. Two lumps?"

"Oh, Miss Batten," said Peggy, drinking the good, hot tea, "you are such a comfort!"

"Me!" said the little woman, genuinely surprised. "Why, what do I do?"

"You make me feel the world's a jolly place even for a lonely woman who works like a nigger and has nothing else to look forward to," said Peggy. "If that isn't comforting, I don't know what is."

"Well, I am a bit lonely sometimes," admitted Miss Batten. "But look at old Mrs. Skrimshaw living in the end cottage after being mistress of a big farm-house all her life. Plenty of sons and daughters. People coming and going all day. Everything depending on her. And now she sits alone all day, thinking, and knowing it can't matter to any one whether she lives or dies. You go sometimes, but that's not what she wants. She wants company of her own sort. The landlady of the Blue Lion is on one side and Mrs. Dunn on the other, but neither of them think, and you can't make 'em. There's no use trying."

Peggy sat up very straight; her tea had already done her good.

"I will make them!" she said. "I can't bear to think of all the lonely women in the world. I *must* do something for them!"

Miss Batten smiled at her indulgently.

"Come! That's more like," she said. "But I can't see why you should dwell so much on the thoughts of loneliness."

Peggy frowned thoughtfully.

"I believe I must be like those people who have the seeds of some mortal illness in them," she said. "I've read that they instinctively fear the thought of it. And I should die of such loneliness as that poor old woman suffers from at the end cottage."

"Well, what can't be cured must be endured," said Miss Batten.

"But I won't endure! I will cure!" said Peggy, echoing the cry of all generous youth.

CHAPTER XI

PEGGY'S GREAT IDEA

WHEN Peggy returned home, she found the Rector waiting in the doorway with a lamp in his hand, his clear-cut features showing like a cameo upon the darkness behind.

"You are late. Where have you been?"

"Only to Miss Batten's," said Peggy, passing him and sinking wearily into a chair. "Had your malted milk?"

"No," said the Rector, "I am not going to take it any more. Your mother and I have counted up the cost for a year this evening, and I was amazed, positively amazed!"

Peggy's loyalty to her mother for once faltered: she knew that this sweetish mixture was to the Rector what a strong cordial is to some other men.

"Did you reckon up at the same time how much Mother's nerve tonic costs?" she said.

"My dear," said the Rector, "I think it is time we went to bed."

Then the strain of Peggy's long working hours made itself really felt at last and she sobbed out, clinging to her father's arm:

"Don't! Don't! If you give up your malted milk, you'll b-break my heart!"

"Poor little Pegs!" he said, and he rarely called her by that name, "I must consider expense, you know."

"Oh, if I were only rich!" she cried.

He smiled down into the pretty, eager face with eyes which were not quite clear.

"Anyway, I'm rich," he said, "so long as I have my little daughter."

Then they went to bed, but Peggy was too tired to sleep and lay awake until dawn.

Next morning she slept late, and awakened to a day of gentle rain, which she employed in setting in order those personal belongings which had been neglected during the stress of trousseau making. As she sat sorting and tearing up old letters, her thoughts went back to her Saturday night's talk with the little dressmaker. This pleasant solitude of hers up here, with the dripping, green garden outside and company waiting for her down below whenever she chose to claim it, was not loneliness at all.

She sat very still on the broad window ledge, smoothing out mechanically a printed circular advertising some strange scheme for obtaining a silk petticoat by which the buyer, on obtaining six other buyers, received the original garment free. This sounds like a conjuring trick, but it was really just a problem for the unfortunate six, who were divided between a desire not to spoil the chance of a friend and a natural reluctance to pass on the unpopular missive.

After sitting thus for quite a long time, Peggy suddenly jumped up and brought forth another paper from the recesses of her writing desk. It was soiled and very much folded, and had been purposely hidden from the casual eye because Peggy was ashamed to keep it and too superstitious to destroy it. Several other persons in Little Pendleton had received a like document, which contained a prayer and a vague threat against those who failed to copy it and forward it on. The Rector had been very severe about the matter, and condemned "endless chains" from the pulpit, but better and wiser persons than Peggy, while pretending to view the curse with

indifference, preferred to be on the right side. Thus it happens that such documents may be found on respectable breakfast tables throughout the length and breadth of England.

Peggy thought of her father down below, tightened her lips, and drawing forth her best writing paper began to write in a copper-plate hand. Then ensued a disturbing conversation between herself and her conscience.

"Endless chains," protested Conscience, "are bad things, whatever the motive."

"Very well," said Peggy, writing faster. "I don't care. I *will* help the lonely people."

"Nothing was ever gained by doing evil that good might come," urged Conscience.

"I'm going to make Mrs. Dunn and Mrs. Jenkins go to see that old woman," said Peggy.

"But it won't end there. It will spread further and further. You don't know where it will end," said Conscience, very much upset; for, being Peggy's, it was an active and straightforward and rather rigid affair, with no adaptability whatever.

"Be quiet!" said Peggy. "Can't you see I'm trying to make up a curse that's not *too* cursing."

This proved, however, to be a difficult matter. It was simple enough to write at the top of the card, "The Lonely Club," and to follow with a request that any woman receiving this letter should visit the lonely person nearest to her, not searching abroad, but attending to the neighbour close at hand. It was also quite easy to insist that the Club must be a secret one, banding women together who would never hear each other's names.

So far, so good. The idea was one which, in a country on the whole most tender-hearted, would be certain to find a certain measure of response. Peggy's conscience

argued with her that such a Club would be a very good thing, provided it could be kept secret, for nobody wants to be visited out of charity to bolster up somebody else's seat in heaven. But here came the sticking point. Peggy found it almost impossible to compose a veiled curse which should force the selfish and reluctant to do their duty. She was reduced in the end to copying out the phrase which had prevented herself from destroying the original paper.

"But," urged Conscience, almost in despair, "you know this is pandering to the grossest superstition. Think of your principles! Think of your dear father!"

"I'm thinking of the old woman at the end cottage," replied Peggy, writing hard. "I said I'd do something, and I will!"

Then Conscience grew silent, though still pulling those little inarticulate strings of feeling which give a sense of discomfort—we all know how—while Peggy wrote in a firm hand: "Should you neglect to do as you are asked in this letter, the Influences from the East may cause some great misfortune to fall upon you!"

"Influences from the East," was a term adapted but not copied from the model, and Peggy felt rather pleased with that—it was mysterious and vaguely blood curdling, without anything too definite about it.

When she had finished writing, she placed the notes in envelopes, addressed them to Mrs. Dunn, to the landlady of the Blue Lion, and to four other people in Little Pendleton, and took them across to the Great Pendleton post-box, by way of precaution.

As she went she smiled to herself, in spite of the slight discomfort of conscience before mentioned, and dreamed of the chain growing and growing until hundreds of letters were sent out every day—of kind women who had never thought, responding gladly—of selfish

ones obeying through fear—of the great army of lonely people no longer lonely.

It was a generous and not ignoble dream, in spite of everything, and Peggy's cheeks glowed and her eyes shone as she walked along with the fine rain falling on her. She felt extraordinarily alive and ready to do battle with the world in the cause of the lonely women.

At the post-office, however, she paused, glancing at the letters. Should she do it, after all? Suddenly she pushed them in, listening as they fell with a thud into the box.

That was done. Now, what would happen next?

Then she turned home again through the wet fields and saw before her all the way that gay, romantic country of youth which may look sad but never dull, because so much is always going to happen.

CHAPTER XII

A COUNTRY WEDDING

THE day of Gladys Wakefield's wedding had arrived at last, and after a doubtful early morning the sun shone out with proper bridal splendour.

Little Pendleton was pleased and interested, because it is always agreeable to have a show for nothing, though the bride herself was no great favourite. Being afraid to associate with the small farmers' families lest she should be considered one of them, she took her stand on her fashionable education, spoke with a London accent, and complained that there was nobody to visit with in the village.

But a bride on her wedding morning can scarcely be other than charming, so Miss Batten opined that marriage would improve her, and the postmistress that a good husband and a home of her own would make all the difference, and thus Little Pendleton got ready to view the happy couple through the rose-colour mist we all love.

Mr. Lawry, stepping along the street, also felt the hymeneal influences of the day. The landlady of the Blue Lion, looking out, remarked:

"He has a fine leg, I must say."

"And he doesn't forget it," added the landlord. "Difference in men. You'd never know Mr. Tremaine was aware he *had* a leg. And yet his are all right, too."

Peggy flashed past with her face gay and eager above an armful of white flowers, and she nodded and called out "Good morning" to Lawry without stopping because

she was in a great hurry to finish the decoration of the chancel. There was nothing lover-like about the greeting on either side.

"Looks bad," said the landlady.

"It does," said the landlord, shaking his head. "But we shall see as the day goes by. If a wedding won't do the trick, we may as well give it up."

Lawry, however, did begin to wonder whether pleasant dalliance should not now give way to a more definite form of courtship. Wedding bells were in the air, and Peggy had passed him without stopping to speak that morning. He walked slowly in the direction of the rectory and discerned Stocks by the garden gate.

"Well, Stocks! Rector in?"

"Yes, sir," said Stocks, staring stupidly. Then he began to gather some white arabis from the border. "I'm just going along to take Miss Peggy these 'ere flowers to the church," he grumbled. "Busy morning, too. Always the way with young females—thinks everything must give way to a wedding—when they've seen as many as I have——"

"Here!" said Lawry generously. "Give them to me. I'll take them for you."

"No. No, sir," said Stocks. "I couldn't think of troubling a gentleman like you, sir."

"Oh, it's all right! I was going that way," replied the Squire, and he walked off with a jaunty step, carrying the bunch of arabis like a presentation bouquet. He was pleased with himself for doing a kindness, to a poor, silly old man, which would also procure him the opportunity for a little talk with Peggy.

Stocks leaned on his spade and looked after the retreating figure. "Well," he muttered to himself, "I've got 'em in front of the altar. On'y the parson wanting. *I* can't do no more."

Within the church, Peggy was putting the final touches

to the decorations of the chancel, while Young Mrs. Taylor peeped through the West door with her baby in her arms.

"Lovely day for the wedding, Mrs. Taylor," said Lawry, who prided himself on so soon being familiar with the names of these people. "Nothing like a wedding for you women."

"Yes, sir. Marrying's a comfortable state. Everybody ought to get married," encouraged Young Mrs. Taylor.

So Lawry went inside and saw Peggy standing with some white flowers in her hands before the altar. The light from the East window fell upon her down-bent face, and the white linen overall she wore covered her dress entirely; she looked like a village bride in a simple wedding gown.

Lawry's heart gave a great thud against his ribs, as must, I think, the heart of any man who had but once thought of marrying Peggy.

As he stood watching her the vestry door opened and Tremaine came across the chancel. Peggy looked up but did not move, and they stood for a moment so before the altar.

Lawry's face went crimson with sudden rage. The intrusion of this young fellow into the picture was abominable—beyond all bearing. Why wasn't he at his beastly bank? Lawry could not speak for the moment, but he coughed, a loud raucous cough, and stamped on the floor.

"Oh, you, Mr. Lawry!" said Peggy, very startled.

Tremaine came forward quickly. "I'm helping by criticism. Hurt my hand. Had to take a couple of days off," he said.

"Won't you come and criticise, too?" invited Peggy.

Lawry gathered himself together, marched up the aisle with his bouquet in his hand like a continental fiancé at the state visit, and said with annoyed dignity:

"I was commissioned by—your—er—man, to bring you these flowers. He said you required them."

"What—Stocks!" said Peggy. "Why, he must have made some mistake. I am so sorry he troubled you. He is a tiresome old man."

"He does seem rather a dull-witted old fool," said Lawry, and he added in a low tone, which purposely excluded Tremaine: "You looked like a bride as you stood there, Miss Peggy."

"Did I look like a bridegroom?" asked Tremaine, not to be excluded.

"No. You certainly did not," said Lawry, flushing a little.

"Hush! We must go; here's the congregation," said Peggy, and Young Mrs. Taylor entered to fulfil unconsciously that law of nature which provides a woman with a crying baby in a back seat at every wedding.

Peggy soon returned and began to play the organ somewhat indifferently, it must be confessed, while the Little Pendleton people rustled and waited and made remarks about the wedding party.

"*His* mother looks downhearted—no wonder; a son's a son till he gets a wife——"

"Hers has been crying, but that'll be for the look of the thing; she and her mother never did agree——" And so on, until Peggy suddenly thumped out the March from Lohengrin, glancing over her shoulder at the wedding procession as it came slowly up the aisle.

For a second, however, she almost stopped playing. This was not just Gladys Wakefield whom she had always known; it was The Bride, mystic, wonderful; a vision which meant something to every girl in the world.

Peggy drew a long breath and thumped valiantly on again until the old organ groaned and creaked under the onslaught; then silence, and her father's voice sounding through the flowery little country church. Mr. Wake-

field, handsome and portly, somewhat too tight about the collar, gave this woman to this man; Young Mrs. Taylor's baby cried; the bridegroom, pale grey of complexion and damp about the hands, wore the air of extreme reluctance usual at this crisis to the most ardent lover, and at last the Rector spoke to the newly married couple with the radiant certainty of one who has never doubted the beauty and sanctity of marriage. No experience had been able to spoil his happiness in marrying two young people whom he had long known—he always felt so sure he was doing a splendid thing for them.

Then Peggy became once more crimson and breathless, playing them out into the sunshine, and Little Pendleton said how sweet the bride looked to be sure, and Stocks was left to shut up the church.

"Well, Miss Peggy," said he, "I think I managed that all right. But these weddings take a deal of managing."

"Stocks," warned Peggy gravely, "speaking of weddings—I hope, this time——"

"No, Miss," replied the Sexton, "you needn't fret yourself about that. There won't be a chance. Why, the company's only getting tea and buns spread out on little tables in the barn—tea and buns!"

It is impossible to convey the contempt contained in these three words as Stocks said them.

"And very nice, too," said Peggy.

"Nice! Why, I've only been married once, and that was a long time ago, and we poor folks, and Little Pendleton not up-to-date like what it is now, and yet even I did it with ham and beef and a glass of beer for a friend and sherry wine for the ladies."

Saying which he stumped off to the vestry, while Peggy made her way to the house of the bride, where Mr. Hewitt stood by his churchwarden, making pleasantly courteous remarks to all who came near him, but beginning to look a little abstracted. Tremaine hovered about

the doorway until Peggy appeared and then took her at once to the table which he had been anxiously trying to keep vacant. The barn was somewhat dimly lighted, though a window had been put in for the occasion, and the table stood in a shadowy corner at the further end, so the two young people were, in effect, cut off from the rest of the crowd.

"Miss Tremaine not here?" said Peggy lightly, sitting down and looking about her with eager interest.

"Now—*would* she be?" expostulated Tremaine, vaguely annoyed by his companion's absorption in the company.

"Why, of course not," said Peggy, laughing. "No more than the Wakefields would visit the Robinsons or that grand relative of Father's in London would bother with us. Everybody's alike in that way. I don't see that anybody can blame anybody else, which makes it, after all, quite comfortable." And she ate a small cake with enjoyment.

"You make it seem altogether such an easy world," said Tremaine, smiling at her. Then he leaned across the table: "I say, Peggy, do you like that fellow Lawry?"

Peggy looked at him, a little startled, half laughing, half serious. "Yes, I think so. He is very kind."

Tremaine's intent gaze continued to rest on her face but he kept back the impetuous words which were urging to burst forth. He told himself, fiercely, while some one proposed the health of the bride in the distance, that he had no right to say anything more. If Peggy were beginning to care a little for him, all the more reason that he should keep silence and let her forget that first stirring of a girlish fancy. It would be a cowardly thing to drag jolly, laughing Peggy of Little Pendleton into the drawn-out misery of a hopeless love affair.

For there was no chance of his being able to marry.

Miss Tremaine managed frugally, according to her lights, but she had not learned to be poor in her youth and seemed to possess no aptitude for making the best of a small income. Still, she had taken him, the forlorn child of a cousin, with no real claim on her, and she had reared him and educated him in her days of plenty; it was not possible to fail her now. He saw nothing heroic in this decision, but regarded it as the plain duty of a decent man which admitted of no alternative.

"Finished?" said Peggy, rising, a little surprised by his silence.

"Yes; shall we go?" he responded.

"Is your hand hurting you?" said Peggy, noticing his grave face.

"Oh, no; only an excuse for a holiday," he laughed.

Then they parted, and he went to joke with the bridesmaids and compliment the bride's mother and behave as a young man of parts is supposed to do at a wedding; but one bridesmaid from London who was tall and dark-eyed and full of ideas said that he was exceedingly amusing, of course, but that something in his face reminded her of a Knight of the Holy Grail.

Which shows that a man who follows an ideal to the point of sacrifice, even if it only means sticking to an elderly relative, must bear the look of those in whom the soul is stronger than the body.

Tremaine, however, would certainly have wished to smother the sharp bridesmaid with her own bouquet rather than permit such an observation; but he did not know what was being said about him. The sovereign mercy is that nobody ever does know.

CHAPTER XIII

THE PLOT AT THE BLUE LION

LAWRY became very intimate at the Rectory during the next few weeks, for the Hewitts were, on the whole, simple people, easily moved to kindness by those who wished to be friendly and kind. The Rector and the new Squire had not, perhaps, very much in common, but Mrs. Hewitt greatly enjoyed Lawry's conversation, which brought a gust from that material, pleasure-loving world to which she was naturally akin, into the quiet Rectory drawing-room.

Peggy also felt glad when he came, because his intelligent, animated talk and his gifts of fruit and flowers made the atmosphere of the house brighter, and she began to confuse her liking for him, personally, with her pleasure in the result of his visits.

Even Jack said he was a jolly decent chap when you came to know him, though getting on a bit, of course, and not to be compared with Charley Tremaine, who was A-1 if you like.

Little Pendleton viewed these frequent visits with satisfaction, but an uneasiness was created when Lawry caused a light wooden bridge to be thrown across the stream which divided his property from that of Mr. Torwood. No account was taken of the fact that the new Squire, being a sociable man, might like to go across and have a smoke or a game of billiards with his neighbour after dinner. As Stocks said in the taproom of the Blue Lion:

"No feller has a right to go courting two young women at once. It isn't fair. It isn't reasonable."

"It would be a funny thing," said the landlord slowly, puffing at his pipe, "a very funny thing it would be, if the bridge was to break and he were to fall in!"

"Ay, ay, so it would," said Stocks from the open door fervently.

"Oh, you!" said the landlady. "What is it, Stocks?"

"On'y the lass forgotten to bring us our beer, Missus," he answered, tramping off again down the brick floor of the passage.

Then poor Robinson, thin and harassed, who had come in for a little sociable chat and men's company, put in his word:

"Any man that runs after a girl like—well, a girl like we all know of—and then shilly shallies about without coming up to the scratch—he wants a ducking."

"Ay, that he does," agreed Stocks, peering round the door again.

"What! Haven't you got your beer yet, Stocks?" demanded the landlady impatiently.

"I've broken my pipe," said the sexton, holding up the long clay stem in one hand and the bowl in the other. "I want a new pipe."

But when his wants were supplied, he went back to the taproom and sat silent for a long time in his particular corner of the high settle by the fireplace, his brow lowering, his eyes fixed, not smoking at all.

The other men nudged each other, pointed with their pipes and murmured in respectful undertones: "Stocks is thinking—that'll mean something, that will!"

At last the great man looked round, not ill-pleased by this tribute.

"I allus was a beggar to think," he remarked. "B'lieve I was born thinking." Then he paused and announced

solemnly: "Lads—I'll stand a mug o' beer apiece all round."

Young Taylor jumped up hastily and ran towards Stocks. He hoped to succeed him as sexton, but he was a youth with a kindly heart.

"Come home with me," he said. "Come quietly home and the Missus shall get you to bed with a hot bottle to your feet, Stocks. I said the digging was getting to be too much for you. On'y last night I said to my——"

"Don't be a fool, Taylor," interrupted Stocks. "Anybody'd think I'd never given anything away in my life." Then he shouted: "Tap!" and the girl came in running. "Beer all round," he commanded largely, "an' put it down to my account."

"Go on!" said the young woman, who was skittish.

"Jade!" roared Stocks, "fetch the beer!" and she fled in disorder.

"Where did you get that swear from, Stocks?" asked a blunt-nosed man who was rather a connoisseur.

"Oh, I heard the Rector call somebody a saucy jade one day. You do pick up things, being in parson's service," said Stocks with careless superiority.

Then the beer came and the benefactor said mysteriously: "Draw in, friends!" So they pulled their heavy seats closer and made a circle of weather-beaten faces in the lamplight, a pewter mug in every man's right hand.

"Hush!" said Stocks, merely by way of a start, for the dramatic instinct was very strong in him. Then he bent forward and talked for some time in a low tone. There were chuckles, one or two faint protests, and then a tense silence.

"There's no moon on Wednesday," concluded Stocks in a boding tone at last.

"And a grand party over at Great Pendleton," hissed Young Taylor in a loud whisper.

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed all the men together, but softly, like a band of conspirators on the stage.

Six days later, on a Friday morning, Lawry went to call at the Rectory, limping very slightly. The car left him at the gate and he walked up through the garden, where the sexton was at work.

"Hope you haven't happened an accident, sir," said Stocks, gazing with simple respect into his Squire's face.

"Well, I *have* had a slight accident," replied Lawry, resting on his stick. "Most curious thing; that new bridge of mine between my property and Mr. Torwood's gave way under me as I crossed over it yesterday. Bridge looked quite all right, and yet the middle actually dropped out of it when I walked across, as if something had eaten the wood right through at either end."

"Stra-ordinary!" said Stocks, pushing back his hat and staring with astonishment. "That do truly beat all, sir."

"A new bridge, too, and the wood sound, so far as I know," pursued Lawry. "But I shall have a word to say to that rascally carpenter. Never employ him again!"

Stocks gazed at the ground thoughtfully.

"I'd wait a bit before you judge, sir," he said, finally looking up. "You bein' a rich gentleman with no need to touch dirt and what not from one year's end to another naterally won't know what curious critters there is about in the country ditches. Mr. Lawry, sir, there is critters that would eat a bridge like yours through at both ends near the banks and never leave a trace."

"Have you ever seen it done?" scoffed Lawry, though he was a little impressed, all the same, because Stocks seemed so certain and his own knowledge of rural matters was so slight.

"Have I seen it?" said the sexton, smiling. "Why, bless your life, I saw a whole batch of the critters no longer since than last Saturday night."

"Where?" said Lawry eagerly. "Tell me where? I should like to trace them."

Stocks, however, poor old man, suddenly lost his animation and looked puzzled and stupid.

"I couldn't exactly say where I did see 'em, Squire," he said, scratching his head. "Somewheres between here and Great Pendleton."

"But you must remember," said Lawry sharply. "Wake up, man, and think."

"I'm getting old; I forget things," said Stocks, leaning upon his spade.

So Lawry turned away in disgusted silence and limped slowly up the path.

"Talk about elevating the rural districts!" he frowned to himself. "It's clearly impossible. Now what on earth can be done with a type like that?"

But as he neared the pleasant Rectory drawing room, his annoyance began to die down. There were flowers about, and a low, broad chair stood by the window where he could sit at his ease and listen to Mrs. Hewitt's conversation while Peggy smiled over the teacups. When all was said and done, he felt that Little Pendleton was a delightful place to live in.

The ladies sat silent after his departure until they heard the Rector's voice saying farewell, and the bang of the front door. Then Mrs. Hewitt remarked, looking down at her long, slender fingers:

"Strange thing about that bridge!"

Peggy began to laugh, and her mother added sharply:

"I see nothing amusing in an accident to a very kind neighbour. Mr. Lawry might have been lamed for life."

"I'm sorry, Mother," said Peggy with quick penitence. "I was not laughing at the accident at all. But that wicked old Stocks——"

"I wonder if he had something to do with it and

invented the insect tale to protect himself?" said Mrs. Hewitt thoughtfully.

"No, no," said the Rector, re-entering. "Why should we think that of poor old Stocks? What object could he have in injuring Mr. Lawry?"

"I can't say, but I do believe he had a hand in it," maintained Mrs. Hewitt, who did not like Stocks.

"Let us give him the benefit of the doubt, Mother," pleaded Peggy.

"Your father is always giving people the benefit of the doubt," retorted Mrs. Hewitt. "But it is the sort of generosity which beggars you more easily than any other." She rose and walked to the door. "I'm worn out with entertaining Mr. Lawry. I will go and rest. You must remember what an effort I make, Peggy, on your behalf."

The door closed and the Rector and his daughter looked at one another.

"She need not, Father. I never will," said Peggy at last. "No one shall ever make me."

"No one shall ever try, dearest," said the Rector, "so long as I live."

"Oh! Time for even-song!" exclaimed Peggy, pointing to the clock; and no more was said.

CHAPTER XIV

THE PROGRESS OF PEGGY'S IDEA

IT was some little time now since those six letters were posted at Great Pendleton, and as Peggy walked briskly down the street toward the end cottage, she felt very anxious to see how the idea was working. Not a single person in the village had mentioned the subject, so far as she knew, and she began to fear that her six stamps had been wasted.

Her hand quite shook in knocking at the cottage door, so eager was she; but the old woman received her coldly, saying at once that folks who stayed away so long might as well remain away a bit longer.

"Then—then everything's just as usual?" said Peggy, bright-eyed and anxious, seating herself by the window.

"Of course everything's just as usual. There won't be any change for me until I die," said the old woman, sighing deeply. But she sat up straight and looked about her alertly instead of gazing with lack-lustre, hopeless eyes into the firegrate.

"I—I suppose you have been a great deal alone, as usual?" asked Peggy, stammering in her excitement.

"Alone!" snapped the old woman briskly. "I've never had a day to call my own for a fortnight. Mrs. Dunn and the landlady from the Blue Lion have been running in and out every day until I'm fair sick of 'em."

Peggy flushed a most beautiful rose to the roots of her pretty hair, and actual tears came into her kind eyes; she was so very pleased, but she only said lightly:

"Oh, they like a bit of change, I expect," and began to talk about her hostess's knitting.

It was splendid, after that, to go home past fields all flowery at the approach of haytime, and to feel that here, at any rate, was one lonely woman grown less lonely through her efforts. Peggy walked on air, resolving to extend the sphere of her activities to the ladies of the county. She thought first of Mrs. Branfield Badger, because that personage, like many material people, was so anxious to be safe and well and happy that she took no avoidable chances and was very open to the warnings of superstition. Thus pleasantly engaged, and thinking also of the old woman who had escaped from the intolerable state of feeling that nothing mattered, Peggy passed through the church-yard. And the sight of her father, who sat on a tombstone, bareheaded, thinking himself alone, came upon her with a sense of sudden shock. His thin grey hair and bent figure and shabby coat were strongly illuminated by the rays of the evening sun, and it struck home to her, for the first time, that he was growing old. She felt that sickening twinge of the heart which must come with this inevitable moment to every child who loves a father or mother. Running forward across the green graves, stumbling as she ran, she said passionately to herself: "It's not true! It's not true!" Her throat contracted, and there was a burning sense of oppression behind her eyes. All the rest of the world must grow old and die, but not her dear, dear father. She flung her arms round his neck and kissed him and held him, as if Old Age were waiting there to take him from her.

"Why, Peggy!" He turned, startled, as well he might be.

"Father," she said urgently, "is anything the matter? Are you not well?"

"Quite well, dear," he said. "I come out here sometimes when I want to think. It is so peaceful."

As he spoke he looked across the flat, green country where the sun began to set, and at the quiet Rectory, and at the rooks flying home above the church.

"I hope I may die at Little Pendleton," he said softly, more in pursuance of some previous thought than to his daughter.

"Don't!" said Peggy sharply. "You're young yet. You're not going to die!"

The Rector smiled and put his hand through Peggy's arm.

"Not yet, dear, I hope. And now let us go in to supper."

"Dad," she said, as they approached the house where pretty casement windows began to show a light or two through budding rambler roses, "you'd wonder why there should be lonely people in the world, wouldn't you? Nothing seems to matter when people who love each other are together."

"God has been very good to us," said the Rector. "Do you remember the old poem, Peggy?

> 'We who have love for our delight—
> Our evening prayer shall be:
> To every lonely soul to-night,
> God give sweet company!'"

"But I want to help them as well," said Peggy softly, after a pause.

The Rector shook his head. "That's very difficult," he said.

"I like difficult things," said Peggy.

CHAPTER XV

THE RECTOR

THE summer days slipped by pleasantly and uneventfully enough, but the impression made upon Peggy's mind that evening in the churchyard never quite faded, and it gave rise to a sort of fierce tenderness for her father which made her always on the alert to serve him. She felt vaguely but constantly that there was nothing in the world she would not do for him, if only he would cease from growing old.

But it was plain, even to Little Pendleton, that the Rector aged, and Mrs. Hewitt complained to her friends that her poor, dear husband grew really more absent-minded every day. He would now stroll forth sometimes to take his letters from the postman and return no more until nearly luncheon time.

It was on one of these occasions that he received a letter in a business envelope from London, and he went to the flat tombstone in the churchyard, which was now such a favourite refuge with him, and there he sat quite still until about eleven o'clock. Then he rose and walked hastily away across the fields without returning through the Rectory garden.

It was a fine morning and the hay was being cut as he went along. People called out: "Splendid weather for the hay! Hope it will last!" And the Rector answered back: "Hope it will last!" which is, indeed, that part of the farmer's litany belonging to the haytime.

But there was less sincerity than usual in the Rector's responses, and he began to walk very slowly as he ap-

proached the Torwoods' house. In the drive he actually stood still every now and then, passing his handkerchief across his brow, and when he reached the familiar door where he had always been made so welcome, he was trembling until he could scarcely ask for the master.

The servant, however, ushered him at once into the sunny morning-room, where Mr. Torwood sat reading the news.

"Delighted to see you, Rector," said that rosy, clean-washed, pompous gentleman, coming cordially forward with hand outstretched; then he stopped suddenly and called to the man who was just closing the door: "William! The brandy at once."

"No, no," murmured Mr. Hewitt with grey lips, sinking into the nearest chair. "I would rather not. I shall be all right in a minute."

He could not speak for a little while after that, but he was glad of an excuse for being silent. He had come to borrow money from this man who had bestowed upon himself and his wife and family, unasked, a thousand small benefits, and he was thankful that physical causes gave him a little respite from the hated task.

"Now, then," said Mr. Torwood briskly, when the servant arrived, "no nonsense, you know!" And he poured the spirit into the glass.

Mr. Hewitt touched it with his lips and put it down on the table.

"Torwood," he began with a great effort, "I have come to ask——"

"My dear fellow," interrupted Torwood with his largest and grandest air, and yet with a real kindness, "I have already arranged to do it."

"What!" said Mr. Hewitt, startled. "You knew, then?"

"Yes," said Mr. Torwood. "I heard from Ethel."

"Ethel!" said the Rector.

"And we talked it over and came to the conclusion

that we would arrange the matter as a little surprise—as a little surprise," and he put his large, broad hand on his friend's shoulder.

"Torwood—I don't know how——" began the poor Rector, choking a little.

"Come, come, man," said Torwood, gratified to have his benefits so received, "the wire-netting and the frame together won't come to any very large sum."

"Wire-netting! Frame!" said Mr. Hewitt, clasping his head.

"Why, yes, of course. The arrangement for the church door to let the air in and to keep the birds out," replied Mr. Torwood. "That's what you wanted, is it not? Ethel said so. And we therefore saw about it in Melbury last week as a little surprise."

Mr. Torwood's alteration of tone to one of aggrieved astonishment roused the Rector to say, in the best words at his command, how grateful he and Little Pendleton must always be for this most acceptable gift.

"I'm having it well finished off," said his friend, "and a little inscription on the frame—'To the Glory of God and Arthur William Torwood.' I suppose that is usual?"

"Quite," said the Rector, recovering himself a little now he knew that it was absolutely impossible to ask for a loan of money on this occasion.

"Well! Well! We'll regard the matter as settled, then. Now we'll find Ethel. I believe she wants to send some asparagus to Mrs. Hewitt."

So Mr. Torwood strolled about the garden and greenhouses with his arm through that of the Rector and, being only human, he found his possessions better and more desirable because his friend was without them. And at about half-past twelve, the visitor left with some very fine asparagus in his hand and an orchid in his buttonhole, placed there by Ethel, and he felt quite cheerful until the Torwoods were out of sight; then those inner

voices, which were always so uncommonly ready to talk to the Rector and his daughter, began to make themselves heard.

"Coward!" they said. "Other men are ready to die for their wife and children, and you dare not ask for the loan of twenty pounds."

And though Mr. Hewitt replied, quite truthfully, that he could and would die for his family if necessary, without any great fear, the voices did not leave him alone. They distracted him all through supper while Mrs. Hewitt was eating one piece of asparagus, delicately, and saying she could eat no more, and then taking another, until the dish was empty. They kept him awake all through the light June night, and next morning he came down to breakfast in his least shabby suit, saying he was going up to London.

"London!" said Peggy, who could not have been more surprised had he announced his intention of immediately proceeding to the North Pole. "Whatever for?"

"Business," said Mr. Hewitt.

"Those people have been writing again?" said Peggy.

Mr. Hewitt nodded..

"But what are you going to tell Mother?" said Peggy anxiously.

"I don't know. I think I had better tell her the truth," said Mr. Hewitt. "I have tried to spare her, Peggy, and perhaps myself, too. But it has been a mistake. We must dismiss Mary and live on the plainest fare until this debt is paid."

Peggy sat staring open-mouthed at her father. It was to her, really, as if he had suggested breaking the East window of the church.

"Tell Mother!" she gasped. "Why, it would kill her. She is not allowed to have any worry at all. She can't even be told when Mary breaks a dish."

Mr. Hewitt rose and went to the window, leaving his breakfast untasted.

"I must tell her," he said at last. And he went upstairs to his wife's room.

Only a few minutes had passed when the bedroom bell rang violently, and Peggy ran upstairs, to find Mrs. Hewitt lying on the sofa in her dressing-gown with her eyes shut while the Rector bent over her in a state of terrible distress.

"Your Mother was just crossing the room. She fell upon the sofa as if stunned, and has not spoken since," he said in a low voice.

"Come here, Peggy," murmured the poor Rector's wife, who had, indeed, every right to be overcome. "Your father says he is going to send Mary away. We are to do without a servant at all."

Peggy took her mother's hand in both her own.

"We'll manage splendidly," she said. "You wait and see. We shall be as jolly as possible together, without any servant to bother us. It will be like a sort of picnic."

"Picnic!" sighed Mrs. Hewitt. Then she opened her eyes and sat up. "I decline to do without a servant," she said firmly. "We must economise some other way. Or—I feel sure Miss Wilson would get up a subscription for a Rectory servant among the people in the neighbourhood if I were to ask her. That is a good idea. The neighbours know I am such an invalid—they have always been so kind——"

"No," interposed the Rector. "We won't do that, Agnes. I can't allow that."

"But what can we do?" said Mrs. Hewitt, and she began to sob so hysterically that it was some time before she was sufficiently soothed to take a little hot milk. After which the doctor was sent for, and when he came down from interviewing the patient he was inclined to be severe towards the Rector and Peggy. He talked solemnly

about nervous collapse, and said that if Mrs. Hewitt were worried or troubled in any way during the next few weeks he would not be answerable for the consequences. It was, he concluded, putting on his gloves, absolutely out of the question to think of dismissing the maid-servant. No change in the household arrangements could take place until Mrs. Hewitt's nerves were in a more settled condition.

So the good, simple man entered his car, and went away, leaving Mr. Hewitt and Peggy to arrange life according to his prescription as best they might—a thing happening every day in thousands of quiet houses, but never growing easier with usage for all that.

"Now what are we going to do?" said Peggy.

"Leave that to me. I shall see our relative, Lord Headingly. After all, if one has to ask for money, it is better to keep the affair in the family. I shall go to London to-morrow and see if I can borrow some money from him."

"But you never meet," said Peggy. "He will not remember you."

"Oh, yes," said the Rector with a little delicate pride. "I think he will. The Hewitts do not forget each other, and I have no doubt that he will lend me a sum of money. My great difficulty lay in making up my mind to ask him."

"I hate your going cap in hand—after all these years," said Peggy hotly.

Mr. Hewitt looked down at the table.

"I think, Peggy," he said, "I deserve it. I ought to have guided my household in such a way as to make this state of affairs impossible." Then he kissed his daughter and roused himself to cheer her. "Don't worry, dear. I shall come back from London bearing my sheaves with me. And I shall quite enjoy the change. I shall wear my best suit, and you may picture we walking down

Piccadilly to-morrow afternoon with all the other smart young fellows."

"In that case I must go up at once and ink your right elbow," said Peggy laughing, but with tears in her eyes. "No really smart youth ever wore a greenish grey elbow with a black frock coat."

CHAPTER XVI

DEW AND ROSES

PEGGY rose at six o'clock next morning and sat sewing at her window. So when Tremaine came to a place he knew of behind a great bush of wild roses, he saw her framed in a dewy wreath of delicate pink flowers and green leaves, her down-bent profile tenderly outlined against the shadowy whiteness of her room.

Her lover stood worshipping behind the wild-rose bush —for a man must be a lover who comes every morning to watch unseen his lady's window, even though he be determined not to marry; and all the girls who have danced in the freshness of early day through men's imaginations since poets were first born, hovered round Peggy as he watched her sewing. Herrick "girls"—how they laughed clear and curtseyed to the roses—Peggy little knew that she was in such a jocund company.

The cool dew dropped on Tremaine's upturned face as he pulled the branches apart to look through, and the feel of it was exquisite—the drops might have fallen, all sparkling, from the very fountain of youth.

It was very quiet here in the early morning and yet the stillness was full of lovely sounds—birds singing—cocks crowing fine and shrill in the new day—a little lamb, far off, bleating for its mother—and then Tremaine heard Peggy begin to sing at her work. She sang so low, stitching and turning, that her voice was scarcely distinct from all the other pretty morning voices.

"New every morning is the love,
Our wakening and uprising prove—"

As Tremaine watched and listened, his lean face was illuminated—the dark bridesmaid would then, more than ever, have thought him like a knight in search of a dream. But he thought himself a very unhappy bank clerk, not knowing that he would find few moments in life more lovely than these.

Then Peggy rose from the window and he let the screen of wild roses close, shutting out the vision. The pigs could be heard grunting impatiently from the farmyard. He said to himself, with a rather proud sense of his own disillusion, that everything in the end had to come to bacon. That was life.

And Peggy, rising startled from her morning hymn, felt also the same conviction. For Mrs. Hewitt stood at the door in a grey dressing-gown, with, evidently, no desire whatever to praise God for the morning; on the contrary, she was very angry indeed at having been awakened to its splendours.

"Really!" she said, "I should think you might have something better to do than to encourage Charley Tremaine in an absolutely useless flirtation!"

"Mother!" exclaimed Peggy. "What are you talking about?"

"Do you mean to say that you did not see him grinning and staring through that ridiculous rose bush?" demanded Mrs. Hewitt.

"He wasn't—was he? Oh, Mother!" said Peggy, blushing pinker than the roses.

"I went to fetch a capsule from the dressing-room," pursued Mrs. Hewitt, "your father being asleep as usual, and I chanced to glance through the open window and notice the hedge moving. I think it is very unkind and dishonourable of you, Peggy, to encourage Charley when you know he cannot possibly marry. Girls who behave in that way just for their own amusement are more culpable than any others. They think nothing of the suffer-

ing they cause, only of their own momentary gratification. I am surprised to find you doing the same, Peggy."

Mrs. Hewitt's remarks were pointed by this unwonted exposure to the unaired day, and her daughter stood aghast.

"But, Mother, I never even saw Charley. I didn't know he was there."

"Don't tell me that a young man would be grinning through a briar bush at a girl a whole field away if she had not encouraged him sometime," said Mrs. Hewitt. "I know better. And I repeat that it is cruel to lead Charley on until he is violently in love with you when nothing but misery to him can come of it. I suppose you are not in love with him yourself?"

"Of course I'm not," said Peggy, blushing furiously.

"But you like him?"

"Of course I like him."

"Then the kindest thing you can do is to leave him alone."

"I do leave him alone! It's he——" began Peggy, in a great rage. But the door closed softly on the grey dressing gown and she had to postpone the end of her argument. For a few minutes she stamped up and down, regardless of waking Jack in the next room, and he appeared with an indignant:

"If you want to play football, why can't you go and play it outside? I was just in a beautiful dream about ice-creams." Then he caught sight of his sister's disturbed face. "I say, what's up?"

"Nothing."

He looked at her scrutinisingly, shook his head, returned to his apartment and reappeared, all in silence.

"Do they *ever* cane big girls?" he said then.

"No."

He said no more, because he knew that a chap does not talk about such occurrences; but he felt sure that what-

ever form of punishment big girls did receive, had been Peggy's portion that morning.

"Have a pep, old Pegs," he said. "They're a bit sticky, but they're all right."

So the young Hewitts sucked the peppermint of peace together, and Peggy felt a little comforted.

CHAPTER XVII

THE RECTOR'S ADVENTURE

THREE hours later, Peggy and her father walked up and down the railway platform, accompanied by the Vicar of Great Pendleton, who was broad, assertive, well-dressed and had a mellow, made-up voice, but was occasionally uncertain, in moments of excitement, about the letter H. He condescended breezily to his elder colleague and was met at King's Cross by another capable Christian in broadcloth, while Mr. Hewitt went out alone into the roar and jangle of the station yard.

At first, as he looked through the windows of the motor-omnibus, he was a little confused by this newer, noisier London; but when he walked down the broad, clean pavements of Piccadilly, past the familiar park with its pleasant grass and trees, and met the stream of pretty women and well-groomed men, he began to feel within him the stirring of an old, forgotten existence. He was a young lad again, up from the University, and all life lay before him. Unconsciously he cocked his shabby hat a little and straightened his shoulders. A band with colours flying came gallantly down the road. There was a splendid gust of perfume from some window-boxes in a tall white house.

The Rector stepped along to that martial tune and the tired years dropped from him.

Then he saw a familiar door bearing a great brass knocker like a lion, and he was an old parson again, coming to ask for a loan from a rich relation. But still he did not feel abased as he had done when waiting at Tor-

wood's door. This was the Head of the Family and, though the errand was hurtful to his pride, he still felt a dim sort of right to something. His grandfather, as well as this man's, had lived in the house behind the brass knocker shaped like a lion.

So when the impressive butler came to the door, and a footman glanced imperceptibly at his gorgeous twin over the shabby parson's head, our Rector remained so unimpressed that their attitude indefinably changed. They, no doubt, argued to themselves that if a person wearing trouser knees like Mr. Hewitt's could fail to be impressed by stockings such as theirs, he must be a very great man indeed, perhaps a Duke, though they could not call to mind any clerical dukes. They therefore told him that Lord Headingly was laid up with a bad attack of gout and permitted him to take a seat while they inquired if the invalid were well enough to see any one.

As Mr. Hewitt sat in a room leading out of the hall he could see a portrait of his mother in blue muslin at the foot of the great staircase. She died when he was a little boy at school and also belonged to a past which seemed a dream. Then he thought of Peggy and Jack and moved quietly out again into the hall and stood near the portrait. It seemed suddenly so sad that his mother should have become just part of a dream.

But one of the men-servants now came up unobtrusively and stood near, for he began to think that the Rector might, after all, be a new and original kind of swell cracksman. Having attended picture palaces frequently when not otherwise engaged, he was peering discreetly for signs of a wig or other make-up when word came down that the invalid was worse that afternoon, and quite unable to see any one. His lordship was very sorry, indeed, but hoped Mr. Hewitt would call again when next in town.

The Rector turned away, greatly disappointed, but before leaving the house he did a rather ridiculous thing. He glanced at the forgotten picture of the woman in blue muslin at the foot of the staircase and felt impelled to speak her name aloud to some one in this place, which had once been her husband's home.

"That lady," he said to the thin men servants, "was Mrs. Ralph Hewitt. She was my mother."

"Indeed, sir. Interesting to you, sir, of course," said the butler with bland condescension, shutting him out.

After that he stood for a few moments amid the sunshine and gaiety of Piccadilly in June, feeling rather bewildered. What was he to do next? This visit had been the end of all his plans and he had none other.

So he drifted aimlessly along, wondering whether he should go home that evening. But the train arrived at midnight and there would be no one at the station to meet him. Then he suddenly bethought him that the firm of money-lenders with whom he had had dealings lived somewhere off the Brompton Road. He would call upon them and see if anything could be arranged in regard to a further advance. No doubt a personal interview would be a good thing. It would, at any rate, convince them of his genuineness and good faith.

He was a little disappointed by the extreme dinginess of the office, and there was not quite that weight and dignity in the bearing of the head of the firm which he had anticipated, the gentleman in question being large-headed, mobile-mouthed, and possessing immense fat hands which he used constantly to emphasise his conversation. But he was a fluent talker and Mr. Hewitt considered him to be, before the end of the interview, one of the most clear-headed men of business whom he had ever encountered.

After about half an hour's conversation, punctuated by a good deal of rushing to the telephone and other evi-

dences of a pressure of business, the financier was reluctantly obliged, so he said, to keep an important appointment.

There was a further interview early next day, and the Rector arrived home about six o'clock in the evening.

"Well, Father?" said Peggy anxiously, as soon as they were alone.

"Lord Headingly was ill and unable to see me," said the Rector, "but I am thankful to say I have made other arrangements. And I have actually come back with fifty pounds in my pocket."

"Father!" cried Peggy joyfully. "How did you do it? Oh! I know. You went to see one of those millionaires who give money away and he was so taken with my dear, sweet old Dad, as well he might be, that——"

"No," interposed the Rector rather solemnly. "No. It was a pure matter of business."

"Well, I'm glad of it. I hate charity," said Peggy gaily.

"The fact is," said Mr. Hewitt, "I gave those people some security and they advanced the money. To put the matter in a nutshell, Peggy, they have a bill of sale on the furniture of the house. The head of the firm said, quite fairly, I think, that while they are ready to lend me money without any security, it is scarcely a business-like proceeding. It is infinitely preferable for both parties that the matter should be put on a proper business footing."

"But supposing you can't pay the fifty pounds back, what happens to our furniture?" said Peggy.

"Just the question I asked myself," said the Rector, leaning back. "And the man laughed. He actually laughed. It appears that the whole thing is purely a matter of form—something—er—like a sort of very superior pawnbroking. They hold this bill of sale and I

get it back when I pay the money. The whole affair is absolutely simple."

Then Jack came running out, and they all three walked together across the lawn in the evening light, which made the Rectory look such a golden place of quiet.

"Peggy and Jack," said the Rector, after a pause, "I have brought you nothing home from London. It was not that I forgot. I saw things—I was greatly tempted—but I thought it was not honest."

He spoke quietly, but something in his voice went straight to the children's generous young hearts.

"I don't want anything, ever!" cried Jack fiercely. "I don't want a single thing."

"Why, Dad," added Peggy, "I really should not know what to choose if you asked me. I have everything I want in the world."

"So have I," said the Rector, walking in between them to supper.

"Lord, make us truly thankful," chanted Jack piously, with one eye on the first strawberries of the year—a fine dish, though the best had been taken up to the invalid, whose nerves still obliged her to keep her room.

But the Rector, seated at his peaceful table between his children, with the sunset on the garden outside, had no need to ask for thankfulness.

CHAPTER XVIII

PENDLETON DANCING

IT was morning in Little Pendleton Post-Office. A pleasant green light filtered through the plants in the square-paned window. The postmistress stood erect behind the counter in a pink blouse, clean and crackling, consciously the equal of any woman in England. Miss Batten, the dressmaker, stood before the counter in a similar state of mind. The cat sat on the counter-end. She felt the same.

To them entered the Squire, buoyantly, aggressively masculine—he felt superior to any woman ever created.

"Morning! Morning!" said he. "Fine day!"

"Dancing weather," agreed Miss Batten. "It's always like this for Pendleton Dancing."

"Ha! But no one has danced at the feast for a long time now, I understand," said Lawry, clean, red rose in buttonhole, smiling on them out of the fullness of his self-satisfaction. "Not like it was when you were young women, hey?"

The postmistress bristled; the cat arched its back in sympathy.

"Grandmother used to tell me about it," said the postmistress stiffly.

Then a sudden gleam of inspiration illuminated Miss Batten's apple-face.

"Old Squire always kept up the Dancing when he was a young man," she sighed. "But you can't expect things to be kept up when the old families go." She looked pensively at the stone floor.

"What did he do?" inquired Lawry.

"Oh——" began the postmistress.

Miss Batten winked so fiercely that the postmistress paused, open-mouthed.

"Old Squire," pursued the little dressmaker, "used always to give a ball to the quality in the Assembly Room at the Blue Lion on Dancing Night, while the villagers were dancing in the field beyond the inn-yard. He liked the feel of everybody being jolly together. He would stand at the Blue Lion door, welcoming the fine folks like the jolly gentleman he was. Ay—we shall never get those days back again, Mr. Lawry."

The new Squire looked out through the door into a green world flecked with sunshine and rubbed his chin.

"There's many a grand house round about where they'll be telling of the old days and this Pendleton Dancing," went on Miss Batten artlessly. "How they used to drive up—whips cracking—feathers and flowers all ablow—men shouting——"

"But you never——" began the postmistress again, anxious to get her word in, but Miss Batten gave her such an awful look that she was once more reduced to silence.

"Ahem!" said Lawry. "There can surely be no room large enough at the Blue Lion."

"There is! There is!" said Miss Batten eagerly. "Old Squire's father built it for the Assemblies more than a hundred years ago."

"But the floor," he said.

"Miss Peggy'll tell you about that. She trained the children to dance there for the Christmas Entertainment. You ask Miss Peggy!"

Then the postmistress saw daylight. Her soul rose up and did homage to Miss Batten.

"There isn't a dancer on the countryside like Miss Peggy," she said, almost trembling with excitement. "My

word, but Miss Peggy would have liked the old times! She was meant for them—all full of life and go!"

"And you, Mr. Lawry," pursued Miss Batten. "I should love to have seen you standing there while all the pretty girls in the county came dashing up and laughing and shouting out to you, and you able to choose any one of them."

"It would have been a splendid sight, it would!" added the postmistress.

Mr. Lawry glanced from one artless, ardent female to another and then at his own well-turned leg. He agreed with them.

"Do you think the people about here would really care to see the old custom revived?" he said doubtfully.

"Care!" cried Miss Batten. "Why lots of 'em about here'll go on doing a thing that *hurts* if they've always done it!"

"You'd be looked on as a public benefactor," said the postmistress, doing her best.

But Miss Batten went one better.

"The gentry round would all feel as if they'd got the old family back again," she said. "To see you standing there—— Well, it would be just a following on, if you know what I mean."

"But there would be the feeding—however, I could have caterers from London, of course," said Mr. Lawry.

Miss Batten turned crimson from hair to boots but only said carelessly:

"Money'll do anything in these times, Mr. Lawry. No doubt but you could do it if you wanted."

"Well! Well!" he flung five shillings on the counter. "Penny stamps, please. We must see, we must see. I am always glad to do what I can for the Pendleton people."

The two women watched him go through the door.

The cat followed to the doorstep and watched him stroll down the village street.

"My! You are a one!" said the postmistress at last.

"You nearly spoilt it," said Miss Batten.

"But how was I to know what you were after?" said the postmistress indignantly. "You'd never seen Old Squire welcoming people into the Blue Lion. It all happened years before you were born."

Miss Batten began to laugh.

"It was fun, though, wasn't it?"

"Well, I don't know," said the postmistress. "But we've got a ball for Miss Peggy, and the young man giving it to lead her out, and if she can't manage for herself after *that*——"

Miss Batten nodded.

In times past, every self-respecting Pendleton female had some new garment for the week-end preceding the annual feast, and the custom still lingered among the unmarried women of the village. Mary, the maid at the Rectory, for instance, took her quarterly day out solely in order to purchase a new hat for Dancing Sunday. With a month's wages in her pocket she journeyed to Melbury by carrier's cart, and started the jaunt by giving a penny to the hypocritical blind man at the market corner, and a pear-drop to a deserted-looking dog, and a shilling to an always slightly inebriated old relative who did odd jobs about the market-hall, for her heavenly charity could resist nobody who was old and in pain.

Then she purchased a blouse of cheap, bright blue satin, and a white hat trimmed with pink flowers, though sorely needing aprons and underclothing, and she returned home with her parcels, a bag of pear-drops, and two bananas, happier than most people know how to be.

She entered the Rectory kitchen from the garden and as she passed the window she saw Peggy washing up

the supper things. Something in the other girl's face—some weariness and pallor after the long, hot day of housework and tending an exacting invalid—touched Mary's easily roused emotions. Poor Miss Peggy—she did work hard and spent all the bit she earned on other folks—and yet she kept up such a bright face that nobody thought nothing about it. It was a shame—it was!

"Oh, back again, Mary?" said Peggy pleasantly, looking up. "I hope you've enjoyed yourself."

Mary came to the kitchen table, pulled out the beautiful blue satin blouse, thrust it into Peggy's face, and said:

"There! Never say you haven't got nothing new for Dancing Sunday!"

"You mean it for me?" said Peggy. "Oh, Mary, how very, very kind! But I really couldn't——"

But here the emotional Mary, tired out with the day's unwonted excitement, began to cry.

"And me picturing you walking into Pendleton Church and knocking 'em all," she sobbed.

"But, Mary——" Peggy's hand was on the heaving shoulder. "This blouse means a fortnight's hard work—half your month's earnings—I can't take that, dear."

How scandalised Mrs. Hewitt would have been to hear Peggy calling the maid of all work, "dear." But Mary was too agitated to notice, and only whimpered out:

"You're too proud to take anything from me. That's it! You think I'm only a servant."

"It's not that!" cried Peggy eagerly. "And if you really want me to take it, I will. I'd love to."

"Then that's all right," said Mary, "But it's a beautiful blouse, isn't it, Miss Peggy?"

"It is, indeed," lied Peggy, unable to wound that generous heart.

"And you'll wear it on Dancing Sunday? Sure?" urged Mary.

"Yes."

"Even if it's wet?"

"Yes."

Mary drew a deep sigh of satisfaction.

"Then them fine folks that's stopping with Mr. Lawry for the ball may put on what they like to come to church in; you'll take the shine out o' the lot of 'em!" And as she stood touching the blouse with her toil-worn fingers, Peggy had that lovely, strange feeling of being warmed in the soul which permeates to every one when they come upon love and kindness in unexpected places.

"You'll really like to wear it, Miss Peggy?" said the girl wistfully.

"I'd be proud to wear it if the King came," said Peggy, and she meant what she said.

Thus it happened that the three young ladies and a sprightly widow who formed the female portion of Mr. Lawry's house party, being conducted to church in old-fashioned style, were not at all impressed by the charms of Peggy of Little Pendleton.

"Good complexion, but common looking——"

"That *dreadful* blouse——"

"*Evidently* the type of parson's daughter who grabs heaven with one hand and the bargain counter with the other," concluded the sprightly widow.

And Lawry, glancing from his delicate-hued, rustling ladies to Peggy in her blue blouse felt a little disillusioned. After all—was she worthy?

Peggy, herself, being no saint, but a very ordinary girl, felt uncomfortably aware of her own crude, ill-cut showiness as she glanced at the fashionable guests in the Hall pew. No doubt everybody would think she was trying to keep her end up—and with this blue satin blouse——

Then the sense of fun came to her aid and she smiled over the psalms at her own discomfiture; but there is no

doubt that King David would have understood; he was so gloriously, blessedly human.

Lawry had meant to stand, benignant and rather majestic, in the church porch, and there to introduce the future lady of the Hall—for he had practically decided to marry Peggy—but the blouse, subconsciously, caused him to imagine a thunder-cloud—which gave him an excuse for hurrying his party into the waiting cars. So it was Tremaine instead who greeted Peggy in the porch, and walked back with her across the churchyard.

"Charley," said Peggy in a low voice when they were beyond the little crowd at the gate, "do you see anything funny about me?"

He smiled down at her.

"Lots of things, Peggy."

"Oh!" she put that aside impatiently. "Queer, I mean. If you can't ask for the truth from a man who's buttoned your pinafores, who *can* you ask?"

He looked her carefully over.

"Well, you are a bit more—more bunchy than usual, somehow. And that blue—you have rather a bright colour yourself, you know——"

"Tell me at once that I look a sight!" interposed Peggy angrily.

"Well, I do call that unreasonable—you asked——" protested Tremaine, when Peggy, looking into his annoyed, rueful face, began to laugh.

"You goose!" she said. "Haven't you learned *yet* that when a girl asks you how she looks, she is feeling doubtful, and wants to be told she looks lovely, even if she's like an Aunt Sally at Pendleton Dancing?"

He laughed too.

"I'm not quite so artless as you think. I do know that about other women all right. But you're different."

And all at once a little breeze fluttered the grass on the green graves in the sunshine—one might, somehow, have

imagined that the lovers sleeping there smiled in their sleep to hear again the lover's litany. For they had all heard it once. They had all been "different."

Next morning at dawn there was a sound of heavy vans rumbling through the village, and eager children sat up in bed to say to one another: "That'll be the round-about!" Or "I wonder if that's the gingerbread stall!" Men went to feed cattle in Sunday garb, and women placed pans of golden cheesecakes in the oven. There was a delicious smell of baking and the shouts of happy children, and men and women laughing about nothing at all because the weather was so warmly, dewily glorious, and company was coming, and it was Pendleton Dancing.

A long, sunny chain of such July feasts linked up Little Pendleton this morning with those who had lived there when the Norman church was new; so that even Mr. Lawry's guests felt the sparkling presence of past joys in the air. They threw cocoanuts and went on the round-about, and the ladies laughed very loud and behaved as if Little Pendlebury were not there to show how high they felt themselves above Little Pendleton, and the young men, who were obvious city men in country clothes, threw shillings about like nuts when the woods are full in September.

The young Hewitts ran from one stall to another, greeting the gypsy woman they had known all their lives, talking to everybody, bubbling over with the joy of being alive in the midst of so much jollity. Lawry watched them and the faint stirring of doubt caused by the blue blouse subsided. This radiant girl was the one out of all the world that he wanted for his wife. He strode eagerly towards her, watched by the interested bystanders, and immediately gave Jack a fairing which caused that astute young man to say, later, to Bobby Parker: "Any

of your sister's young men ever give you two half crowns at once, hey?" To which his friend could only reply: "Fancy feeling like that about a *girl!*"

But Lawry's feelings led him further than this, and in about five minutes Little Pendleton joyfully observed the three spinsters, one sprightly widow, and four smart gentlemen all doing homage to Peggy, with the Squire acting as proud and beaming master of the ceremonies.

"I think," said the landlord of the Blue Lion as he paused perspiring at the doorway, "that my half crown's as good as won."

"Look!" said Young Mrs. Taylor to Stocks excitedly, "he's taking her to buy gingerbread. Come on!"

They edged nearer amid a little crowd of interested and thrilled spectators, for there is something deeply important about this ceremony in Little Pendleton. Young men whose intentions have been vague may at any minute declare themselves suitors by taking the young woman of their choice to buy Dancing gingerbread. So long established is this custom that a crookedly printed inscription runs along the back of the stall above the piles of little pale yellow, crisply hollow cakes, which are as different from ordinary gingerbread as night is from day:

"If your sweetheart loves you true,
He'll stop and buy a cake for you!"

"He! He!" said Young Mrs. Taylor, reading aloud the inscription and giggling excitedly.

"There, Miss Peggy!" beamed Lawry, putting a large packet into her arms.

"That's right! That's right!" said Stocks aloud, scarcely able to prevent himself from giving a cheer.

"It's all gingerbread and kisses now—but *wait!*" murmured the postmistress to Miss Batten bodefully. "However——"

"Better'n the kisses without the gingerbread," retorted Miss Batten.

"A-a-a-h!" growled Stocks, and a sort of murmur, distinctly audible, ran through the crowd. For Mr. Lawry was giving a packet of gingerbread to each of the other ladies, as well as Peggy.

"I said it was a narum he wants, and it is!" exclaimed Young Mrs. Taylor angrily.

"Don't talk about what you don't understand. 'Arums isn't a fit subject of talk for a respectable young married woman. Go home and see if your baby's woken up!" said Stocks, turning upon his niece; for, like many gentlemen who are rather free in their own conversation, he held very strict views concerning that of his female relatives.

"Say what you like," muttered Young Mrs. Taylor as she drifted up the lane; "he has a narum-y heart."

She was determined to have the last word if only the sparrows heard it.

CHAPTER XIX

THE BALL AT THE INN

THE old Assembly Room was alight with wax candles, the floor gleamed, the fiddlers were tuning up—Tremaines and Torwoods and Wilsons and Hewitts of a hundred years ago might have come back and thought themselves in a world that had scarcely changed at all, so far as outward appearances went. But the demeanour of the young ladies would have made them ponder, so wanting was it in curtseying modesty; and the manners of the young men would have made them feel quite ashamed to be seen in such company. No bows—to be called bows—no hand on anybody's heart, no deportment anywhere. And yet a host with a leg they would have admired, though they would have fainted at the thought of being entertained by a grocer, even if he provisioned the round globe.

But the row of chaperones seated on cane and gilt settles by the wall waved fans and gossiped, just as of old, excepting that spinsters who would have been there now whisked round, kicking jauntily, more popular than girls of seventeen.

Mrs. Hewitt was provided with a special arm-chair, a footstool, and a table for her smelling bottle, and Mrs. Branfield Badger murmured behind her fan: "Behold the mother-in-law elect!"

"Charming," replied Miss Wilson. "If he is so attentive when he is only hoping, what will he be if he is accepted?"

"Like most other sons-in-law—frightened lest she

should help his wife to see him as he is," retorted Mrs. Branfield Badger, who was too stout to dance and resented it bitterly. Then she turned to a more important neighbour and Miss Wilson was cast adrift, to anchor at last on a lonely gilt chair in a draughty corner. Here Peggy found her at the end of the fifth dance, rather in the way of people's toes, but quite happy.

"My dear, I am so enjoying myself," she said. "Such attention from every one. I really think there is scarcely a person in the room with whom I have not had a word. And now to watch the dancing is so delightful. A little strange, of course, when one was used to a slow waltz, but all the more interesting on that account."

"And how have you been getting on at home lately?" said Peggy, leaning towards Miss Wilson in her young radiance like a pink flower.

"Well, really," answered Miss Wilson, "(my dear, pink does suit you!) I have been positively fêted at home of late. Pos-i-tively fêted. Mrs. Branfield Badger and a basket of fruit one day—somebody else and a cucumber the next—scarcely a day without a caller. I don't quite know why people have suddenly grown so kind, but I daresay they were really wanting to be sociable all the time, and I did not encourage them sufficiently. I feel sure I must have been to blame, or they would not be so attentive now, would they?"

Peggy flushed with pleasure until her cheeks matched her gown and she was more like a rose than ever.

"Then you're not lonely any more?" she said eagerly.

"Oh, no. I don't get a chance to be."

"How perfectly splendid!" breathed Peggy.

Then Lawry claimed her and Miss Wilson murmured: "Dear girl, she is as delighted as if *she* had brought me company," and then laughed to herself at the ridiculous idea of Peggy's having an influence with Mrs. Branfield Badger.

"Well, Miss Peggy," said Lawry as they went down the room, "I hope you like your dance."

"My dance?" said Peggy.

"The idea was yours," said Lawry, "and," he added in a lower tone, "I did it solely to please you."

There was a moment's silence, and Peggy answered rather coldly:

"Everybody likes it, Mr. Lawry. I am not the only one who is pleased."

"I don't care a hang about the rest!" declared Lawry, which, if not the strict truth, was near enough for any man who had dined well, welcomed a curious and delighted county, and made a position for himself that evening which might under some circumstances have taken years to attain.

Peggy cast about her hastily for a reply which should be cool without being crude, but her mind remained a blank, and she felt greatly relieved that Lawry was called away by his duties as host before her silence became apparent. Tremaine then came up to claim the next dance.

"I say, Peggy," he remarked, "you've only given me two—what's that for?"

"Full up," said Peggy.

"You weren't when I first asked you. Only there were such a lot of people about, I couldn't say anything," protested Tremaine.

"Well! Two's enough. You know the signs of the dance. One, a formality; two, a friend; three, a flirt; four, a fool."

Peggy spoke quickly and nervously, rattling on in an artificial manner unlike herself.

"Let us be fools then, Peggy," pleaded Tremaine. "I'm ready."

But Peggy remained adamant; for she had beforehand arranged the matter with her conscience, which was, as has been said, a rather erratic but inconveniently active

one. Two dances only, would acquit her in her own eyes of any desire to behave in the way so condemned by Mrs. Hewitt; for the most exacting mother could not then accuse a daughter of cruelly "leading on" a young man unable to marry.

"Well, won't you have this, anyway?" she said at last, as the music tum-tummed and her partner stood staring at the floor, broodingly inactive.

He said nothing, but put his arm round her and guided her skilfully into the pretty, whirling, many-coloured crowd under the great gilt candelabra. He was a good dancer and she felt the sense of security and exhilaration which comes from dancing with a man possessing great physical strength perfectly controlled. When the music ceased they looked with shining eyes into each other's faces. So men and girls had looked at this ancient feast before the Normans came, before the Romans came, in the dim beginning of England. These two danced that night in a long procession of happy boys and girls which reached right on to a haze of morning sunlight.

"That was all right," said Tremaine.

"Rather," said Peggy.

Alas, for the lovely things the others must have said, according to all the poets; but perhaps, after all, they never did say them; they only looked them, as Peggy and her lover did, and the poets put them down.

Anyway, the next five or six dances passed in a sort of dream for both these young people of the twentieth century, though they laughed and talked and were very gay with the friends they had known all their lives—calling merry greetings across to Gerrys and Bills and Dorothys, remembering who fought at picnics and who tore her clothes, though every one now was so sedate and gracious. Peggy had the most lovely feeling of being at a party of old playfellows and yet in the middle of a fairy tale;

the warm reality and sweet unreality so mingled that she could not divide one from the other.

She stood by the Rector when Tremaine came up to claim his second dance, and her heart began unexpectedly to thump against her side, her breath came short; she looked round her in her pretty pink gown, half startled. What was it?

"Our dance, I think," said Tremaine formally.

"Pretty sight, Charles," said the Rector, who looked rather white and worn among this gay company, but was as much a part of it all as the panelled walls and the candelabra.

Then the dancing began and Tremaine again took Peggy in his arms, and, as he did so, she knew why her heart beat in that odd fashion; she had been longing for and yet dreading this moment.

"Peggy," said Tremaine, bending over her, "will you come out into the garden?"

"We can't. The passage is blocked by the supper marquee," said Peggy, looking up at him and then quickly looking away.

"I know a way past the brewhouse. Do come, Peggy."

He drew her quickly through a side door, down a long brick passage and out into the deserted inn garden. A lane ran by where a few stragglers from the feast were walking, but it was very quiet here among the cabbage roses and night-scented stocks; a quietness accentuated by the blare of the round-about organ in the field beyond the inn, and by the softer music of the violins from the open windows of the dancing room. The great marquee, showing dimly like an enormous lantern, was behind them.

The moonlight drew the colour from Peggy's cheeks and gown and from the flowers; she was not just Peggy; she was the Girl among the Roses. Tremaine felt a new reverence and strangeness which only increased the tu-

mult of his emotions. But he pulled himself together with a great effort and tried to speak quietly.

"Do you know what I've brought you out here for?"

"No," said Peggy, looking at him with wide eyes.

"I want to know why you would only give me two dances. Is it because you are afraid of offending that chap Lawry?"

"You know it's not, Charley."

"How am I to know?" he demanded. "Everybody says this dance is being given in your honour. Of course, you would wish——" Then he broke off suddenly. "Oh, Pegs—and I can't give you anything!"

"Charley—I'd rather have a rose from you! Give me a rose!" cried Peggy. "Now—give me a rose!" She pointed to a dewy branch. "This one half-opened—— Oh! not in your nice clean gloves!" And she laughed tremulously.

"No matter. I'm not going to dance any more to-night."

"Why not?"

He did not answer. "There, Peggy, there's your rose. But what can you do with it?"

"That!" she said, impulsively pushing it into her gown. Immediately a long, deep scratch appeared on her white neck, plainly visible in the moonlight.

He came near, gazing at it, then slowly he bent and pressed his lips to the place.

"It doesn't—hurt——" murmured Peggy foolishly, not knowing what she was saying, because her whole being seemed to be filled with a sudden vague wonder and glory that left no room for anything but feeling.

"My darling," he said, "all I could give you would only hurt you, like that!" Then he slipped down upon his knees and hid his face in her gown. "You're so sweet, so sweet—— Oh! Pegs, I want you so!"

She leant towards him in her pink gown, like a great rose herself among the other roses.

"Poor boy!" she whispered.

Then she started violently, for in the perfect stillness of the evening a yew-branch waved against the moonlit sky.

"What's that?"

"Where?"

"Something in the hedge."

"Who's there?"

The branches parted and a face peered through, grotesque in the moonlight.

"Me," said Stocks. "I only came to see what time Mrs. Hewitt wanted her bath-chair, Miss Peggy."

Peggy turned upon him, and with some difficulty restrained the first words which rose to her lips.

"How did you know I was here?" she said finally.

"I catched sight of you and Mr. Charles going past the brewhouse," he said, "and I knew you must be coming here or to the cowshed because the passage only leads to them two places; and Miss Peggy isn't scarce got up for a cowshed. I hope I've given no offence—but Mrs. Hewitt's bath-chair——"

"You knew," said Peggy, "that my mother is not using her bath-chair to-night. She is coming back in Mr. Torwood's car."

"Lor'! So I did!" said Stocks, slapping his knee, "but I clean forgot. You must excuse me, Miss Peggy. I'm an old man and with all these fine doings I've gotten muddled in my head. I'm an old man—an old man!"

The branches closed together and he trudged, humbly muttering, down the lane, but at the entrance to the inn-yard, he paused and grinned like an old gargoyle in the moonlight, an expression of triumph on his battered features.

Peggy and Tremaine looked at each other in silence.

"What do you think——" said Peggy.

"I think he's a lying old eavesdropper," said Tremaine fiercely.

Peggy turned and began to walk towards the inn.

"We must go back," she said. "I hear voices in the marquee. It must be nearly supper-time."

But as she spoke, the dim side of the marquee began to move, a stream of light fell across their feet. The side of the tent parted, and, seen from the darkness outside, the scene within was one of extraordinary brilliance and light and splendour! The walls, covered with pale green draperies and masses of roses, the shining damask and silver and glass and piled-up fruit and flowers on the tables, the enormous array of gold-topped bottles, and, in the midst of it all, Lawry, his face deeply flushed, his air of a conqueror of fortune accentuated by all this luxury which had arisen in an inn garden to his command.

"More open!" he shouted. "The place is too hot. Let the air and the moonlight in! There's no wind to disturb the tables."

Black-clothed men sped about among the blaze of light and colour, carrying out his orders.

"That'll do," he said. Then he moved away.

But it was as if he had shown Peggy the power and splendour of riches in a vision—the whole thing was so real and yet so apocryphal and suggestive.

She ended the odd silence which had bound herself and Tremaine with a long breath.

"How strange!"

"Like a sort of black magic, eh? No, Peggy—it's yellow magic—the only potent kind now——" They moved towards the brewhouse.

"Charley—there's one kind stronger——" she said very softly.

They were in the dark passage leading past the brewhouse now. He put his hands on her shoulders and bent

towards her, but could not see her face, only the gleam of her shining eyes.

"You mean that?" he said. "You really mean that, Peggy?"

"I do, Charley," she said, in her kind, true voice.

Then they heard steps behind them, a sound of kissing; another lover and his lass had found this quiet place. They crept away on tiptoe, hand-in-hand, into the lighted corridor of the inn.

"To-morrow," whispered Tremaine. "What time to-morrow?"

"Shall I meet you?"

"No!" He stood before her, tall, eager, gloriously happy. "No, I'll come to court my lady under her father's roof."

"Charley! You simply must not look like that," said Peggy, glancing round. "I must talk to Father and Mother before any one else tells them."

"I'm not going to tell any one," said Tremaine.

"You goose! You're telling all the world," laughed Peggy. Then she whispered, holding her pretty skirts ready to flit into the ball-room: "Good-bye—sweetheart!"

He strode forward, but she turned with her finger on her lips and he stood still, looking after her as she fled along the corridor like a rose before a summer wind.

When she entered the ball-room, she felt at first a little confused by the lights and colour and movement. She was paler than usual and her hair a little loosened; her eyes shone like stars.

"Hullo, Miss Peggy! Do you know you cut my dance?" said a man near the door.

"So sorry. I—I went out for a little air," said Peggy.

"Well! I'll forgive you. You look as if you'd found it," said the man, smiling.

"Found what?" said Peggy, meeting his laughing eyes bravely.

"Ah! You know best." And he, too, looked tenderly at her; she was so very lovable that night.

Then Mr. Hewitt, on her other side, said rather gravely:

"Peggy, your mother wants you."

Those words sounded like a warning bell across Peggy's fairyland; the splendours slipped away to either side, the rose-wreaths were drawn up into the ceiling; she was left gazing at a blank stage where a middle-aged invalid, greatly annoyed, wished for an account of the past hour.

"Where have you been, Peggy?" said Mrs. Hewitt, when her daughter approached. "Your hair looks as if you had joined the company in the inn-yard."

"I went—for a little—air," said poor Peggy, bereft of any other idea.

"Air!" said the Rector's wife, no more credulous than the disappointed partner. "And who assisted you?"

"Only Charley Tremaine!"

"Oh!" said Mrs. Hewitt. "Well, here comes Mr. Lawry to take me in to supper. It is a marked compliment, when you consider the important people who are present."

"But you being such a great invalid—and the wife of the Rector of the Parish—people will quite understand——" murmured Peggy rather incoherently as Lawry came up.

"Now, Mrs. Hewitt!" He crooked his arm. "Only wish I could take you too, Miss Peggy."

"Most kind!" said Mrs. Hewitt. Then, all nods and becks and wreathing smiles, she advanced on her host's arm to the seat of honour in the centre of all that opulent display in the marquee.

"So glad you are able to enjoy it," said Lawry when they were triumphantly installed.

"I really think," said Mrs. Hewitt, sparkling round

upon the tableful of notabilities, "that I should be always well if I had many evenings such as this. As my doctor often says, half my illness comes from my starved nature calling out for more mental fresh air."

The man who had greeted Peggy in the doorway was at the same table and he gave a little laugh, murmuring to his partner under his breath:

"Seems a family trait—a craving for fresh air——"

"He! He!" said the partner. "Lot of you like to go fresh-air hunting with Peggy, I bet!"

"Lawry would."

"Tremaine did!"

"Oh! Nice kettle o' fish!"

And the lovers, meanwhile, felt sure that their tender secret was safe-hidden from every profane eye.

During supper, Lawry constantly glanced towards the table where Peggy sat amongst a group of merry young people, and once, after an unusual merry burst of laughter, he leaned confidentially towards Mrs. Hewitt, saying:

"I've been so taken up all the evening that I have scarcely seen Miss Peggy. But I am going to enjoy my dance after supper. I have something to tell her."

"Don't you think that confidences lose by being made in a crowd!" said Mrs. Hewitt, maintaining her sparkling air with an effort. "Now, I think a garden—and solitude——"

He turned quickly.

"You mean that?"

"Well, a girl so unused to excitement is apt to be a little upset by such an evening as this," murmured Mrs. Hewitt.

"Most I know would be upset the right way, into a man's arms," said Lawry.

Mrs. Hewitt flushed faintly through her bleached, fine skin.

"But a girl shy in such matters—one with very delicate feelings——" she suggested.

Lawry played with his fork, looking down; at last he replied:

"Oh, well! I suppose that's what I like about her. I shouldn't have cared for a girl that was to be had for the asking. But I'd planned——" and he sighed.

"Dear Mr. Lawry," murmured Mrs. Hewitt, touching his arm lightly, "you know my heart is with you."

"Thank you. I know it is," said Lawry with some feeling; for he did indeed think that his proposed mother-in-law considered him a fine fellow, personally, though he was well aware that she also liked the material advantages to be gained by the alliance.

So he danced with Peggy, and was tender and gallant, but not too gallant, and she was kind, as she must have been to the meanest thing that lived this happy evening, much more to the man who had given the party.

At last, in the summer dawn, motor-cars began to slip away down the old roads where coaches once had travelled; but laughing, tired girls sat in them and whispered of their partners just the same while the old folk snoozed and started and snoozed again.

The Rectory lay all quiet in the sunrise with the scent of roses about it—a very home of peace—as the three revellers went up the stone steps.

"No need for candles! Fancy going to bed by daylight!" said Peggy, still young enough to look radiant in the dawn.

"Do you think you could get me a cup of tea?" said Mrs. Hewitt, going heavily upstairs, assisted by her husband.

"Of course I can," said Peggy, running into the kitchen: but then she stopped short, for Mary sat by the table with her head on her arms, fast asleep.

"Mary!" said Peggy, touching the girl's shoulder.

"I won't!" said Mary, starting up. "Not if there wasn't another man in the——" Then she broke off and began to laugh. "Oh, I thought you was Bill Walker."

"Why, Mary, is anything the matter? What made you sit up? You were in at ten, weren't you?" said Peggy, immediately the anxious house-wife.

"I was," said Mary. "But I knew she would want sommink either to eat or drink, and there was your dress to undo."

Peggy flushed with pleasure and failed to reprove the disrespectful "she," for Mary seemed to add the last touch of love and kindness and beauty to this most happy night.

"Did you enjoy yourself, Miss?" said Mary, as she busied herself over the oil stove, while Peggy fetched the special cup and tray.

"Oh, yes, Mary! And you?"

"Champion!" said Mary. "Bill Walker bought me gingerbread, but I didn't let it go no further. And I got a chap for every dance, did you?"

"Every one," said Peggy, drawing up the blind to the top so that the morning sunlight fell upon the two girls. "Well, Pendleton Dancing's over!"

"Aye—it's been a glorious Dancing!"

CHAPTER XX

THE DAY AFTER THE DANCING

IT was a dullish day with a cool wind and inclined to rain. The last stalls jolted through the village on disreputable vans. Paper blew about the inn-yard. Aladdin's tent went away in pieces, leaving the garden rather trampled. Little Pendleton was short in temper, found work a trouble, suffered from all the inevitable symptoms of the "day after."

Through this atmosphere Peggy hurried during the morning hours, leaving copies of the *Parish Magazine*. Everybody was in and wanted to criticise somebody else. The Rector's daughter exercised discretion until, being a naturally indiscreet person, she felt as if the top of her head were lifting up and down, and that she must say straight out what she thought or stifle.

The lack-lustre eyes of Little Pendleton followed her up and down the street.

"Fine feathers make fine birds. She looks nothing in her old print this morning."

"And on'y dressed plain last night, so they tell. Not like them ladies from London and Miss Torwood."

"And giving it hot and strong to poor Young Taylor because he got a drop too much last night. No business of hers. She thinks owt becomes her."

"*She*'ll never marry no Squire."

"Not she!"

But one very old rheumy man spoke up suddenly from his corner by the door.

"She's as pretty as a pink, she is! If I was King

of England she's the lass I should be after: she's like the lasses there was when I was young. I'd like a kiss off her, I should!"

Peggy was so used to a critical attitude on the part of Little Pendleton that she went about her business not much heeding it; but when she chanced to overhear that last remark, her quick feelings were moved and she impulsively bent down and touched the old man's cheek with her fresh lips.

"There!" she said laughing. "Is that like the kisses you remember?"

But the spark of animation had died out.

"A pretty young lass," he muttered. "I h'aint had a kiss off a pretty young lass for fifty year. Grandbairns' kisses don't count. There's nothing to 'em."

"But Miss Peggy *has* kissed you," yelled a granddaughter.

"Kissed me? Did she? Ay, but it was of a Sunday afternoon fifty year ago. Pretty as a pink, she was; pretty as a pink."

"He's very tiresome. You must please excuse him," said the grand-daughter in a mincing tone.

But Peggy's heart was full of nothing but love and kindness for the old man whom she had taken back to wander, for a little while, in those sunny Sunday fields of fifty years ago.

The grand-daughter looked after her, hurrying home in her print gown and shady hat.

"Miss Peggy means well. She isn't my idea of a real lady, but she means well."

"No," said the neighbour addressed, "no real gentry would speak about a chicken I sent to the rectory as she did."

"What did she say?"

The neighbour hesitated.

"Well—she said the clergy were always ready to re-

ceive the ailing and outcast of their own kind but it didn't extend to poultry."

"How low!" said the neighbour.

However, if a next morning atmosphere pervaded the village, it was even more marked at the rectory, where the Rector sat writing in his study with a most careworn look on his face, Mary went about her tasks in an indifferent, listless fashion, and Mrs. Hewitt lay in bed with a headache. The headache appeared to be increased by the air of joyousness which emanated from Peggy when she quietly entered the bedroom, for the sufferer groaned slightly and said in a feeble tone:

"I feel very ill!"

"Can you eat any luncheon?" said Peggy anxiously. "There is only cold beef, but I can make you an omelette."

"Very well," sighed Mrs. Hewitt. "I must try. The doctor always says that whatever I do, I must endeavour to keep on taking support. No one knows the effort I make. But for you children and your father, I should just let myself go."

Still, after eating the whole omelette, the invalid slept for a couple of hours and then rang for her daughter.

"Dear Peggy," she said, with her slender hand to her brow, "I have no headache medicine." But she flushed slightly as she said it, though the statement was quite true, for she had poured it away in the bathroom only a few minutes previously. She would not tell a lie.

"No medicine!" said Peggy. "Oh, I'll go over after tea and get some."

As she spoke, she pictured that evening walk with Tremaine and her face grew dreamy and radiant; it is a glorious thing, say what you will, to be at that happy time when a man and a girl and any country lane make paradise.

"After tea! That is rather a long time," murmured

Mrs. Hewitt, pressing her brow. "Don't you think, dear, you could bicycle over at once? It would not take very long."

Peggy hesitated.

"Charley is coming to tea," she said. "He is going to get off early on purpose."

"Of course, if I can bear the pain a little longer, dear," said Mrs. Hewitt, turning over and closing her eyes.

"No! No!" said Peggy. "Of course I'll go. I'll just tell Mary to ask Charley to wait, as Father is out."

"Thank you, dear. I am sorry to trouble you," said Mrs. Hewitt, and Peggy rode off, feeling she had been a selfish creature.

The invalid, meanwhile, rose and dressed herself with such surprising alacrity, for an invalid, that she was actually installed in her corner of the drawing-room when Tremaine entered. After preliminary greetings, she said in her most dulcet tones:

"Won't you take this little chair by my side, dear Charley? It is here that my husband and children come when they want advice or comfort."

Tremaine flushed.

"What? Has Peggy told you?" he said.

"Sit down, please," she insisted gently and he sat down, disposing of his long legs with some difficulty. "Dear Charles," she continued, putting her hand on his, "Peggy has told me nothing. I wish to know nothing. But I want you to listen patiently, if you will, to what I am going to say."

"Of course," said Tremaine, uncomfortably.

"I rather gathered last night that you and Peggy had come to some sort of understanding; that there had been some passage between you when Peggy was absent so long from the ballroom. I do not wish to know if this was the case. I have been too ill this morning even to speak to my family: but I felt I must make this great

effort to talk matters over with you." She removed her hand.

"It is very good of you," said Tremaine, feeling as if he were at the dentist's.

"You will forgive my being plain-spoken? I am her mother. And she is all the daughter I have, Charles," said Mrs. Hewitt.

"Of course," said Tremaine once more.

"Then, to be quite open—are you in a position to marry?"

Tremaine rose. This was a thing which had to be faced standing.

"No," he said.

"Do you contemplate asking any girl to share the home which Miss Tremaine also shares?"

"I do not," said Tremaine. "It would be certain misery for her."

"And you can't get rid of your aunt?"

"How can I?" said Tremaine. "After her taking me in, a little lonely chap without a penny, and doing everything for me, and now she herself is left penniless—you know I can't, Mrs. Hewitt."

"Do sit down again, dear boy," said she. "Of course, you being you, I do know it. And that is why I am going to beg of you to leave my poor Peggy alone."

He sat still a minute, looking down. Then he leaned forward with his elbow on his knee and his head in his hand.

"Oh, Mrs. Hewitt," he groaned, "if you'd seen how she looked last night in the moonlight! I did try not. But just for a minute it seemed as if the Universe might go burst if only I could tell her."

Mrs. Hewitt glanced at him and sighed sympathetically; he was so handsome and so charming.

"Poor little Peggy!" she said aloud. "But it can't be. You see yourself it can't be!"

"Couldn't we wait?"

"Wait! Until all her youth and freshness are gone and neither of you care much. Oh! Charley—think of those you know who have waited! Is it fair?"

There was silence in the room. A bee buzzed on the window pane.

"No," said Tremaine heavily, at last, "it's not fair. But if it's too late—and we love each other—you know Peggy's faithful nature——"

"That's just it," said Mrs. Hewitt. "Neither poverty nor ill-health nor disgrace nor anything outside would move her. *You* must do it, Charles. You, yourself."

"I can't make her not care," he said in a low voice, and yet with a great and joyous pride thrilling through it.

"You can try. That side of her is very undeveloped for her age. Half her affection for you, perhaps more, is that of a sister or an old play-fellow. You can stop it, if you will, before it becomes anything more than the first fancy of a happy girl. You need not spoil all her youth, unless you like. I am sure of that, Charles."

He got up and walked to the window. The sky was grey above the grey church-tower; he was to remember that, and the crow wheeling above it, all his life, though at the time he did not seem to notice them. At last, he turned round.

"I'll do my best," he said quietly, but his face seemed to have absorbed the greyness of tower and sky. Then he held out his hand. "Good-bye."

Mrs. Hewitt jumped up with unusual energy.

"But you mustn't go," she said. "That would spoil everything. You must just be nice and ordinary to Peggy, as if nothing had happened."

"I can't do it," he said.

"For her sake," pleaded Mrs. Hewitt. "And for mine, too. If she found I had been interfering she would never forgive me. Think what my life would be if any-

thing came between me and Peggy. An invalid, chained to my sofa, and estranged from my only daughter—I throw myself on your mercy, Charles."

"Very well," he said, dully, seating himself.

A little more or less, what did it matter?

He did not reason clearly or he might have acted in quite a different manner. But nobody does see their own love-affairs clearly, or there would be very few romances in the world.

Then Mrs. Hewitt rang for tea, and the Rector came in, and at last Peggy appeared, flushed and joyous, from her bicycle ride.

"What! Up, Mother? I am pleased. Well, Charley!" And under this off-hand greeting she tried to hide the "Hail, my beloved! behold thy handmaiden!" with which the heart of even the most modern girl must greet the chosen lover—so the old fashions still persist in love.

He put his tea down, for a disgraceful trembling of the cup betrayed him.

"Cooler to-day," he managed to remark; and within he thanked God, as we have all done in tight places, for the weather.

Peggy looked at him with a swift question in her eyes. What was it? There was something in the air——

"We shall have rain," said the Rector, all unconscious. "Good thing it was so fine yesterday." And they fell to talking of the ball, and the ladies staying with Lawry, and the wonderful supper.

Peggy, excited and bright-eyed, gave random opinions about everybody, and the guest soon rose to depart. The Rector accompanied him to the door and Peggy was left behind. She heard the voices grow fainter, the hall door open; a sort of desperation seized her and she ran out across the hall.

"Charley!" she called rather breathlessly. "Wait a

minute. I'm going to the post-office. Will you walk with me?"

The eagerness and anxiety in her fresh voice almost unmanned him; he must tell her. He must make all square with her. Then he realised that to do so would entirely defeat the object in view.

"I'm sorry," he said woodenly. "I have to go straight back. I'm in a hurry. Good afternoon."

He strode off and Peggy leaned against the door-post. She felt as if some one had given her a blow on the heart.

"Hard-working fell——" began the Rector, then he saw Peggy's white face. "What is it? Are you ill, dear?" he exclaimed.

"Nothing," answered Peggy, making herself move away from the support of the door. "Bit tired. Dancing last night. Bicycling."

"Come and have another cup of tea," he urged, leading her towards the drawing-room.

"No. I'll take off my things. Down in a minute," she said, going up the stairs.

Once in her room, she locked the door and sat down. For a minute or two she thought about nothing. She was only so inexpressibly thankful to be alone. Then the pain began to throb, to gather, to grow into an agony.

So he had meant nothing. He had been simply led away by a pink frock and the dancing and the moonlight.

She was no child and knew that men could, strangely, love a girl to desperation one night, and cool down as strangely next day. It was a part of the queer, masculine nature, like a love for tobacco and silence, and to be taken as a matter of course. But Tremaine's love for her had seemed something quite different from that. Something so irrevocable and eternal that any change

in it seemed as little likely as that her God or her father should cease to love her.

She did not shed a tear but sat staring before her. At last the clock outside struck six. She must go downstairs and see about Mrs. Hewitt's supper.

As she stood by the kitchen table, beating and mixing, Mary glanced at her with compassion.

"Fun's all very well," she said, "but it does make you feel a bit off next day, doesn't it, Miss?"

"I'm quite well, thank you," said Peggy. "Another egg, please."

"I'm very Mondayish, myself," pursued Mary. "You know: how you feel after Sunday, only more so. And I noticed Mr. Charles looked the same. I expect he had a splitting headache. We shall all feel better tomorrow."

At that, ridiculous as it seems, Peggy began to feel less unhappy. Probably he was suffering from a bad headache—and after all he *had* come to tea.

She was not one to nurse gloomy forebodings if she could possibly help it, and decided by bedtime that everything could no doubt be easily explained. Her last thoughts before she went to sleep were of the happy day to which she would awaken.

CHAPTER XXI

PINS AND NEEDLES

PART of the pleasantness which Peggy anticipated was a visit from Miss Batten, the little dressmaker, who had promised to assist in the making of a new gown while the Rector and Mrs. Hewitt spent the day at the Branfield Badgers. So now about three o'clock on a grey, scented afternoon, with windows open to the garden, these dressmaking operations were in full swing. Mary had been instructed to take visitors into the study, and the drawing-room was encumbered with cottons, ribbons, sewing-machine and a large, old-fashioned wicker dress-stand of which the upper part alone remained useful, the rest being covered by a sheet.

Miss Batten sat by the table, sewing busily. Peggy sighed.

"Do you know, Miss Batten," she remarked, "I don't care so much for this lilac material as I thought I should."

"Bilshnesh!" snapped Miss Batten incoherently, her mouth full of pins.

"What!" said Peggy, startled out of a pensive calm through which she danced with Tremaine amid a scent of roses.

"I said," replied Miss Batten, removing the pins, "that it was biliousness. Too much dissipation. But that's folks all over. Play the nanny-goat with themselves and blame life."

Then she advanced with the lilac gown in her arms

and Peggy slipped it on, trying to get a proper view of herself in the long, old mirror between the windows.

"Don't you think it's a little bulgy on this side?" she said doubtfully.

"What's that matter?" replied Miss Batten, snipping and pinning. "You can always take off, but you can't increase, unless you're a widow in the Scriptures——" she ceased talking and bent closer, absorbed in her work. "Stand still, Miss Peggy, or else I shall make your skirt lop-sided. My customers always think they're straight and my skirts crooked, but I could tell a different tale—if I weren't too much of a lady."

"Are you getting it short enough?" said Peggy, peering down.

"I am," said Miss Batten. "Those that think to take the men by showing so much leg will get hoisted with their own petard—whatever that is. They'll find legs is nothing when you can always see them." She paused, standing back. "There, that might have come out of Regent Street, though I says it as shouldn't—Oh!" She started and stared out through the open window.

"Mr. Lawry coming in here," whispered Peggy, also gazing out. "That idiotic Mary! Do I look all right?"

"Yes. But mind the pins. And there's no time for me to get out of the way. Oh dear!"

For one second, Miss Batten stood wringing her hands between the windows while Lawry advanced, purposeful, up to the one on the left. Then she popped like lightning under the dress stand. "He's got the asking eye and so little puts 'em off," she muttered breathlessly, in her restricted quarters. "A man once went to propose and met a rabbit on the road and that made him think of large families and he went home and stopped a bachelor and she married a sweep that drank! You can't ever be too careful."

"Oh, how do you do?" said Peggy, holding out her hand to the intruder.

"I rang but no one came," said Lawry, "and as Stocks told me you were here, I took the liberty——"

"Stocks again!" said Peggy.

"Nice old man, Stocks!"

"Oh, very," said Peggy; then she continued: "I'm afraid my father and mother are out. Won't you——"

"For heaven's sake, Miss Peggy," interposed a low voice, muffled by the wicker cage, "be careful how you sit down."

Lawry started slightly.

"What's that?"

"Oh, you hear the birds so plainly in this room—and the mice," murmured Peggy. "As I was saying—it's a lovely day for the time of——" she sat down—"Oh!" she started up again, "for the time of year," she concluded, striving after aplomb.

Lawry also rose and said, puzzled but polite, "Yes, wonderful weather!"

Peggy pulled her skirt round and sat down again, cautiously.

"I'm doing a little dressmaking. Of course, you're not interested in clothes, Mr. Lawry?"

He edged his chair a little nearer.

"'Pends who wears them, Miss Peggy. Now this," he touched her sleeve, "this reminds me of a violet, you know. A sweet violet!"

"How poetical!" said Peggy.

"Every man is, once in his life," said Lawry.

"I don't like all poetry," said Peggy quickly. "Only the swinging, rhyming kind like——"

"I've not been reading poetry lately. I've been living it," said Lawry solemnly.

"Another 'Deserted Village.' Or was it something about a churchyard and you the unhonoured Milton?

But you're very much honoured in Little Pendleton," gabbled Peggy. "Shall we go out into the garden?"

"Thank you. I would rather stay here. Stocks is just outside."

"But you like Stocks," urged Peggy desperately. "Oh, do let us go and have a word with Stocks."

Lawry rose and stood before her.

"You can't put me off any longer, Peggy. I want a plain answer——"

She jumped up and faced him.

"Don't!" she said. "Oh, don't go on. I can't let you go on. It's not fair."

"I am going to say my say," he persisted doggedly. "In common fairness you ought to hear me out."

"In the garden," said Peggy, pulling him by the sleeve. "If only you'll come into the garden."

Then he put his arm round her and said in her ear, rather hoarsely:

"I'll go anywhere with you. Anywhere. You know it."

"But I can't——" and she began to push him away, when he gave a great start and dropped her. "Damn!" he said, surveying a wounded finger. "I beg your pardon!"

"Pins!" said Peggy. "Keep away! I was being fitted. I'm full of them."

Lawry sucked his finger and advanced upon her once more.

"If you're like a porcupine——" he began ardently.

"I'm so very, very sorry, Mr. Lawry," interrupted Peggy.

"I don't care what——" he began, and then, suddenly he pressed his hands upon his eyes.

"What? What?" said Peggy. "Oh, surely you haven't pricked your eyes!"

Lawry sank heavily upon a chair. "It's what the

doctor warned me would happen if I ate so much meat," he groaned.

Peggy shook his shoulder, greatly alarmed.

"What do you mean?"

Lawry uncovered his eyes and gazed dully across the room.

"Do you see that thing? It seems to me to move. And yet of course it is stationary."

Peggy turned quickly round and saw the wicker shape rockily but unmistakably advancing across the floor.

"Moving?" said Peggy very distinctly. "Of course it's not moving. It wouldn't be such an absolute, born idiot."

The wicker shape stopped.

"I knew it. Oh, Miss Peggy," said poor Lawry, "to think I have managed to get everything I want in the world and now I may have a stroke any minute."

"No, no," said Peggy. "You must not talk like that. You are all right. Indeed you are!"

"But I distinctly saw that—that affair heave and move across the floor."

Peggy stood for a moment, staring hard at the wicker-shape. It heaved again and gave a violent thump. What did that mean? It sounded like a protest of some sort, but no matter.

"Mr. Lawry," she said, "the thing *has* moved. Can't you see? It was here by the sofa when you came."

He shook his head.

"You're only telling me that to reassure me."

"But I tell you it's true! It's true," said Peggy, stamping her foot. "Oh, dear, what shall I do?"

The wicker shape gave another thump.

"It was *here*," cried Peggy, running across the room, "and now—now it's *here*. Can't you believe that?"

"I'm afraid I can't," said Lawry heavily.

"Oh! It's no good. I've got to do it," said Peggy,

seizing the sheet and leaving the wide wicker skirt exposed. "Now! There!"

Miss Batten grinned apologetically through the open wicker work.

"I'm sure I'm very sorry. My only wish was not to intrude," she said earnestly as she crawled out, dishevelled, her hair over one eye.

"What the dickens——" said Lawry, almost beyond speech.

"I shall regard what I have heard as a sacred confidence," pursued Miss Batten, fluently agitated. "Iron brands would not force me to reveal one word. I am deeply sorry."

"Miss Batten did it for the best," said Peggy. "She naturally thought it tactful to—er—retire when callers came."

"But why couldn't she go out by the door?" said Lawry.

Miss Batten was unable to explain about the man and the rabbit in mixed company, so she only murmured once more, rubbing her cramped and aching knees:

"Iron brands shall not force me to reveal," after which she tottered into the kitchen, feeling that she must either have a cup of tea or go into hysterics for the first time in her life.

"Well," said Lawry, as the door closed upon her. "Now for my answer!"

The lover-like afflatus was, for the moment, dying out: but he felt no less determined to have the girl upon whom his choice had at last fallen.

"You ask me plainly," said Peggy, looking up at him with sweet directness; "then I will tell you straight out that I can never marry you. I have nothing to give, and you so much—it is very good of you to think of a poor girl like me—but I can't, Mr. Lawry."

"Is there any one else?"

"No. Yes," hesitated Peggy. "I scarcely know——"

"I have a right to know if you do."

Peggy flushed and her lip trembled, but she answered bravely:

"I care for somebody. I think he cares for me."

"Then nothing's settled?"

"No—no," said Peggy.

"My dear child," said Lawry, "I shall not begrudge you a first fancy. All men and most girls have them. But I hope and think you will come to me in the end."

"Don't think that," said Peggy earnestly. "I want to be quite straight and not take you in, at all. I shall never marry you."

He shook his head and smiled.

"You don't dislike me?"

"Of course I don't. You, who are so kind to us!" said Peggy warmly.

"Then I can wait," he said, and something in his voice or his look vaguely alarmed Peggy.

"You quite understand?" she said rather breathlessly. "Never! Never! Never!"

He smiled again, saying nothing and she found his smile alarming as well as irritating.

"You think," she flashed out, "that you can get everything in the end, just as you did all the grocers' shops."

But before the words were out of her mouth she felt deeply ashamed of them, and this moved her to take a much more friendly farewell of her suitor than might otherwise have been the case.

"Then I may still come to the Rectory?" he said. "You are not going to quarrel with me for having loved you?"

And as no normal girl, however modest, can feel this to be a just ground for a quarrel, Peggy said impulsively:

"Of course not. I hope you will come just the same as ever!"

Lawry showed his good sense by departing immediately, and Miss Batten returned from the kitchen to find Peggy looking after him with kindness and a sort of regret.

"Well," said the little dressmaker, quite restored by her tea, "I did my best. Angels can do no more. It wasn't my fault he took me for an apoplectic stroke."

"No one is to blame but that old wicker shape," said Peggy, giving it a push.

"I'm sorry, though, that I was there to make you feel shy," said Miss Batten. "You had no call to keep it up before me, Miss Peggy. I should quite have understood you saying yes to a good match like that the first time of asking. However, he may ask you again and then everything will come all right. But refusing is a dangerous game if you want a man. I never did!"

"I don't want Mr. Lawry," said Peggy. "But, of course, we must not say one word about all this, Miss Batten."

"Very well," said Miss Batten.

"Not even to Father or Mother," added Peggy. "I do think it is the meanest thing to have a proposal and tell. It ought to be just between the girl and the man and no one else in the world."

"I think you may trust me," said Miss Batten, rather offended.

"I do! I do!" cried Peggy, kissing the wholesome apple cheek. "And whoever I marry, you must make my wedding gown. I should never feel properly married unless you made it."

CHAPTER XXII

AN AUTUMN VALENTINE

MRS. HEWITT returned at half past five, tired but triumphant, after a most successful day. The Bishop had also been at the Branfield Badgers and had done such homage as a bishop may, to a brightly suffering saint of the female sex. The Rector and the Prelate had less in common, and there was on this occasion some ground for Mrs. Hewitt's complaint that her husband always seemed dull and depressed when she was enjoying herself.

"Any one been?" she said, sinking upon her sofa.

"Mr. Lawry."

"Oh?" alertly.

"Miss Batten was there. He did not stay long," added Peggy hastily.

"Oh!" said Mrs. Hewitt again, but in a different tone. "Well, I am dreadfully tired. It has been a long day."

Then some one rang the front door bell, and Peggy went out into the garden because she was sure it must be Tremaine, and she could not meet him first before her father and mother. He would no doubt follow her in a few minutes, so she walked down the little avenue between the nut trees with her heart beating fast and a sense of trembling, delicious suspense.

Something within her, stronger than herself, cried out: "He is coming!" She was the little sister of all the maids in the world who have been loved.

The birds chirped, the crisp leaves rustled expectant,

her ears ached with listening for the sound of a footstep.

Then came the heavy trudge, trudge of Mary down the path.

"There's Mrs. Wakefield. She wants to see you about the Mothers' Meeting. The Missis has gone upstairs."

And no one but a girl in love—or a woman who remembers—can know how Peggy felt as she followed Mary into the drawing-room where Mrs. Wakefield stood, solid and self-satisfied, by the fireplace.

"I have not come to complain," said the Churchwarden's wife, and at this well-known phrase the spirits of the Rector's daughter sank lower than ever. "You do your best. It is your misfortune and not your fault, Miss Peggy, that you are not a Mother."

"Yes," said Peggy, dully abstracted.

"But there is a feeling that the Mothers' Meeting ought to be conducted on different lines——" And so on, and so on, until at last Mrs. Wakefield departed, feeling that she had helped to pull the parish together and had adequately filled that position of Churchwarden's wife to which it had pleased Providence and the Rector to call her.

Peggy ate very little at supper, because suspense is of all emotions most destructive to the appetite, and immediately afterwards she went out to gather the last of the raspberries. The evenings were already drawing in a little, and before long the berries and the raspberry canes were one mass of dim greenness beneath a grey sky tinged with sunset, so Peggy put her basket down and walked restlessly about the garden.

The white lilies were now in flower, and nothing earthly is so like a spirit as a white lily in a green garden at twilight. The dew fell. Peggy's restlessness died down into a tremulous longing for Tremaine, for

the touch of his arms about her again, for the sense of strength and protection his embrace had given her.

She was so used to taking care of others that she never heeded it; but to-night she wanted him to take care of her.

And in the lane beyond the garden hedge, Tremaine was also walking up and down, dreaming of her, longing for her. When he thought of the fire and sweetness of her kisses, he could scarcely bear it, so great was his longing for her.

But he was a very true knight, and tried to put first of all the happiness of his lady. He was mistaken, but perhaps men gain wisdom of the spirit by such mistakes.

At last it grew quite dark. There was no moon and bats were flying about the old houses. Night-moths thudded softly against the leaves.

Peggy went indoors to bed and lay wide awake in the darkness.

About one o'clock Tremaine also crept softly up his own garden path and into the house. As he locked the door, Miss Tremaine came forth and stood at the top of the stairs with a lighted candle in her hand.

"You're late, Charles," she said.

"Am I?" he answered shortly, walking upstairs.

She peered into his face, holding the candle close.

"Gracious, Charles! You look ghastly! Are you ill?" she said.

"No, thank you."

She followed him towards his own room.

"But you must be ill to look like that."

"For God's sake leave me alone," he said, banging the door.

So Miss Tremaine, who was very unused to such treatment, lay awake too.

But the white night once over, things went on much

as usual for Peggy and Tremaine; while Miss Tremaine finally came to the conclusion that her nephew must have had an acute attack of indigestion.

After a week or two, Tremaine called once at the Rectory to find Peggy out, and after some desultory talk with Mr. and Mrs. Hewitt he came away. He had never been much in the habit of calling there, so his rather less frequent visits were not noticed by the Rector.

Mr. Hewitt, indeed, had engrossing matters of his own to engage his attention, and in any case he would probably not have observed whether Peggy walked about the fields and lanes with the young man or not. Charley Tremaine was there—a part of things—just like the Blue Lion and the Torwoods and the ivy-covered wall opposite the stable door. But with Robinson next door, he had never, since the episode of the red cow, ceased to feel a closer and more real fellowship; and this deep, human feeling, quite apart from his rather remote but true compassion for all sorrow, began to extend to any of his flock who were in financial difficulties. He would walk miles to arrange about a backward rent, or a bill for cattle-cake unpaid, with a keen, vital interest which made a widow on a lonely farm say to Robinson one day:

"There's something different about our Rector."

"Ay," said Robinson, "you feel as if you could tell him your troubles."

"It used to seem before," added the widow, "as if he couldn't bother about nothing less than an angel losing its wings."

"I wish he looked better in himself, though," said Robinson anxiously. "My Missis thinks he looks real bad, as if he might go off into something serious."

"You can almost see through him," agreed the widow.

"Not that he ever was fat, but he looks ill, so he does. And Miss Peggy looks no great shakes, neither."

Thus Little Pendleton took note in its way of what was passing; and though Peggy remained as gay and alert as ever, there still appeared a difference in her, as well as in the Rector, which was rightly put down to disappointment in love. But the lover for whom Little Pendleton supposed her to be pining was Lawry, not Tremaine.

At the Blue Lion, a spirit of depression prevailed in regard to Peggy's future. The bar shone as it had done when the first beginning of Pendleton match-making was discussed, but a blaze of dahlias on the table showed that it was now harvest time instead of spring, and there was an instinctive desire on the part of all to see the matrimonial sheaves gathered.

"I'm sick of it all," said the landlady, observing once more the progress of the Squire up the street. "There he is! Off to the Rectory again! And nothing comes of it."

"Like an old hen that's always cackling and never laying an egg," assented Mr. Dunn the butcher, also rising and looking out.

"A fine leg," sighed Miss Batten, who had chanced to drop in, solely on a temperance errand.

"And poor Miss Peggy does what she can," continued the landlady, "smiling and smiling at him, and never giving up hope, though you can see her getting thinner every day."

"If I was the Rector," said the landlord heavily, striking the table with a fat hand, "I should ask his intentions. That's what I should do. Ask his intentions." And the good man glared round the bar.

"P'raps he hasn't any. I don't like to say it, but I'm afraid Miss Peggy may have made herself too cheap," said the landlady.

"She hasn't, then!" cried Miss Batten, almost bursting with mingled feelings. "If she wanted Mr. Lawry——"

But discretion had to prevail because of that solemn promise in the rectory drawing-room, and she could only conclude lamely:

"Miss Peggy could have the Squire if she liked, no doubt."

The landlady shook her head.

"Never a girl was played fast and loose with, who hasn't said that," she responded. "But I'm sorry to see Miss Peggy wearing the willow. I am indeed!"

"She isn't—run down—wants a tonic," said Miss Batten, taking an indignant departure. She went through a great deal in Little Pendleton, in those days.

Stocks also suffered. He felt the prestige of the rectory to be lowered and himself involved in the downfall.

"A young lady isn't to be courted like a servant lass," he said with dignity. "It takes time to court a rector's daughter, mind you. We shall see Miss Peggy at Pendleton Hall in the end."

"They're saying the Rector ought to ask his intentions," said Young Mrs. Taylor.

"No need to do that," said Stocks with a laugh: but in his heart was no laughter, and he was irritable with his friends in the tap-room.

At last harvest was over, and into the lull of that quiet time fell a stupendous piece of news. The Squire was about to go to America on business; something to do with some oil-shares he had thought valueless, but which now seemed to justify the advance of capital if investigations could be made on the spot.

"Going without having proposed!" gasped the landlady. "He'll get one of those American girls, certain, sure. They say they're so taking to the men."

"Well, *we* can't do nothing," said the landlord. "You don't want *me* to ask him his intentions—do you?"

But Stocks said nothing. He only leaned most of the day upon his spade and thought. In the evening he encountered Young Mrs. Taylor.

"When is Volentine's Day?" he said briefly.

"What? Why? Surely you aren't——" began Young Mrs. Taylor, greatly excited.

"I said, when was Volentine's Day?" repeated the oracle.

"Fourteenth of February, o' course," said Young Mrs. Taylor, her mouth open.

"*Why* is it fourteenth of February?" demanded Stocks.

"I'm sure I don't know. Whatever——"

"Then there's no reason you shouldn't send a volentine any day you like."

"He! He! Not that I know of," giggled Young Mrs. Taylor nervously.

"Hum! That's all I wanted to know," said Stocks, going on his way to the Blue Lion.

Once there, he drank his ale in majestic silence. Then he spoke.

"Any one here know how to make up poetry?"

"What!" They put down their mugs and stared at him as if he had asked for a live rattle-snake.

"I said, 'Can any one here make up poetry?'"

"Ha! Ha!" guffawed a stranger in a corner.

Stocks looked at him.

"I will deefer the rest o' what I was going to say until that gentleman's gone."

Silence fell, broken by the defiant remarks from the stranger who at last sidled out into the street.

"And now," said Stocks, "we can talk serious. I've got a paper here. I want to write a volentine, and volentines must be in poetry."

"But it isn't Valentine's Day," objected a thin man, who always objected on principle.

"Little Pendleton isn't going to be bound by what's past," said Stocks. "Little Pendleton's going to strike out a line for itself. Little Pendleton——" he paused impressively, "is going to send out a volentine to-morrow."

"Lor'!"

"Who to?"

"To a gentleman, that I won't name, that wants one," said Stocks slowly, glaring round the room.

"Well, I sent one to a cook once," said Young Taylor. "It had a picture of a woman with a red nose and went like this:

"'Cookie, your nose
Is like a rose—'"

"What," interrupted Stocks, "is the word to rhyme with shilly-shally?"

"Valley."

"Bally."

"Rally."

Stocks held up his hand. "That'll do," he read:—

"Squire, will you cease to shilly-shally,
And now onto your duty rally."

"Brayvo!" shouted the audience. "So that's what you're aiming at. Brayvo!"

Stocks bowed slightly, very slightly; it might rather be called a wink, and proceeded:

"If you don't get her, someone else will,
So now, be a man, go in and win!"

"Does that rhyme though?" said the constitutional objector.

"Near enough. Near enough," said Stocks with dignity.

"But there isn't nobody else that I know of, now that Mr. Charles has cooled off," said Young Taylor.

"Pshaw! Don't you know that they never bother about truth in poetry. The more lies there is in it, the better it is," said Stocks.

"But you haven't got no picture," said the objector.

"Haven't I?" said Stocks, drawing forth a soiled scrap of the *Melbury Herald*. "Here's that snap-shot of Miss Peggy that come out in the paper after last Flower Show."

"Well, you do beat all, Stocks!" said Young Taylor, with genuine admiration.

"I only *think*," said Stocks. "That's what I do; I *think*."

"But it's so black," said the objector, looking at the portrait. "It makes her look like a nigger."

"Do better yourself then!" said Stocks, flinging down his pencil. "That's all I ask. Do better yourself!"

"No. No. Hold your tongue! Stocks knows," said all the rest.

"Shame o' yourself, when we're all doing our best for Miss Peggy," said Young Taylor, supporting his distinguished relative by marriage.

"I'm not behind any in wanting Miss Peggy to get him," declared the objector indignantly. "She looked after my little lass in a way I can never forget. And I'll stand a sheet of the best paper and an envelope just to show it. They have 'em at the post-office with flowers in the corner."

He hastened out, to return with a whole box of fancy paper.

"Wouldn't divide it," he said, out of breath. "It was sixpence halfpenny. Never mind. In for a penny in for a pound."

So the lines were copied carefully, the portrait affixed above them with stamp-paper, the address written.

"Seems a pity to waste all this beautiful paper!" said the purchaser, turning over a sheet bearing a red rose.

"Look here!" said Young Taylor, suddenly inspired. "Why not send a volentine to her as from him? It'll hearten her up a bit."

Stocks clasped his head.

"I can't make no more poetry."

"I know a bit," said Young Taylor. "It'd just go with the picture.

"'The rose is red,
The violet's blue,
Carnation's sweet,
And so are you!'"

The weather-beaten faces peered anxiously over Stocks' shoulder as he wrote; and yet some say that romance is dead. They have not been to Little Pendleton.

"How shall I end up?" said Stocks, mopping his brow.

"From your loving Lawry, of course," said Young Taylor, who had been married last and therefore seemed nearer to the question.

"But she'll know it isn't his writing," said Stocks, suddenly pausing. "Jove! I never thought o' that!"

"Whoever did write volentines in their own writing? The great thing always was to disguise your hand," urged Young Taylor, enthused with his idea.

Stocks rose, having completed his task.

"There! That's done. Now we must leave it. Little Pendleton can't do no more."

He walked solemnly out to the post; but as he went,

a fat man in a corner who had previously said nothing, suddenly blurted forth:

"Volentines is out. Both the rude sort and the loving sort. They're out. They've been out this twenty year."

No one took the slightest notice; he was just the sort of man who never is listened to by his fellows, though speaking great and irrefutable truths: you find such in every assembly.

A few minutes later, the Blue Lion was closed for the night. The Matchmakers of Little Pendleton straggled home under a moonless sky, filled with the pleasant, inward glow which comes from doing good at a moderate expense.

"It was a pity they didn't wait until the fourteenth of February; then it would have seemed natural and all right," said Miss Batten briskly, begging the question. "Doing the right thing at the wrong time is another job of the well-meaners, and it's about the worst of any."

Peggy took up the valentine and smoothed it thoughtfully with her slender fingers.

"The person who wrote this wanted to make me feel happier," she said.

Miss Batten nodded.

"And that is about the sweetest thing any person *can* want, isn't it?" continued Peggy. "After all, I should hate to live in a place where nobody cared. I love Little Pendleton."

A few days later Lawry went away, and though he was quite unaware of the fact, his determination to leave without again proposing to Peggy had been strengthened by the receipt of the valentine. If he had imagined himself to be viewed by outsiders as an unsuccessful suitor, he would most probably have wished to end the situation one way or another, but now he knew himself to be regarded as the pursued and not the pursuer, he felt able to adhere to that policy of purposeful waiting by which he had always succeeded in the other affairs of life.

So he gave an order to the gardener to send fruit and flowers to the rectory, and to the gamekeeper to supply game, and went off, certain that these gifts would remind Peggy of him constantly and pleasantly.

And indeed, on one particular day, the evening before the Little Pendleton Harvest Festival, Peggy did feel quite affectionately towards him. She was so warmly and easily grateful for any kindness that no wonder the supper table which she was then spread-

ing made her see the absent Lawry through a haze which softened his complexion and glorified his disposition and legs until he strode quite god-like in her imagination through the American continent. For Mrs. Hewitt had been bored and more ill than usual with the cessation of summer callers and dull autumn setting in, and Peggy knew that the delicate roasted partridge, and big bloomy grapes, would make things a little brighter for the family during the whole evening. She began, in fact, to connect cheer and brightness with the thoughts of Lawry, because they so often now came through him.

But at supper Jack spoke rudely and was sent from the table, while Mrs. Hewitt bemoaned their inability to send him to a decent school. Then Peggy cleared away, it being Mary's night out, and about nine o'clock the invalid went to bed. Mr. Hewitt had been very silent during the meal, but that was so much his habit now as to pass unnoticed, and Peggy anticipated nothing more serious than a talk about the hymns for the Harvest Festival when he called her into the study.

"Sit down, dear," he said very gently; "I have something to tell you." And then Peggy began to be afraid. She did not speak, however, but sat quietly, looking up at him.

"I have seen Garston," he said, Garston being the Melbury lawyer whom the Hewitts employed on the very rare occasions when they needed one. "He tells me that the furniture of this house must be sold unless I pay the iniquitous claims of those money lenders in London."

"You can't have had as much money as that," said Peggy, trying to keep quiet.

"No. I signed new documents each time I got money. I see now that I have done very wrong." He sighed

deeply. "I knew I was doing wrong all the time, Peggy."

"But you hoped against hope that you would be able to pay up and pull things through," said Peggy quickly. "You did it all for us."

He shook his head.

"Not all. I did not like to place myself—to beg, for that is what it comes to—from people I knew. There was a great deal of false pride about it. Perhaps, though I never thought it, I have been too proud, Peggy."

"No, no, dear," said Peggy, longing to throw her arms about him and yet knowing it was best to sit still.

"So now I am punished. Justly punished. It will be in the papers. Every one must know. But that is nothing compared with what you and your mother will have to undergo."

"Somebody will help," said Peggy. "Cheer up, Father, they will never let our furniture be sold. Why, I do believe even Miss Batten out of her savings——" Then she stopped short and began to cry at the sight of her father's face. "Don't look like that," she sobbed. "Oh, poor, poor Father!"

"Poor little Pegs," he said sadly, smoothing her hair. "I thought I was sparing you, and all the time I fear I was only making the shock harder for you to bear now. I should have told you long ago."

"The money-lenders will never let it come into court," said Peggy, drying her eyes and determined to be brave. "They will never dare. I am sure they have done wrong."

Mr. Hewitt shook his head.

"Garston says they have done nothing actually illegal. He does not advise me to fight. He says, rightly, that it will bring public discredit upon the Church."

"Garston is an old woman," said Peggy. "I would

fight it out if I had both Archbishops and all the Bishops standing round taking notes."

"Hush, dear," said the Rector; "I must just do what is best for the Church to which I belong. If—if our furniture is sold it will make a great stir in the neighbourhood but not beyond, and our friends will lend us a few things to go on with; we shall live it down here, where people know us. We shall bring no public discredit on the Church."

"It is dreadfully hard, living down things when people know you," said Peggy.

"It is the bravest course, and I know you like to be brave," said the Rector.

Peggy waited a moment, pressing her hands together lest she should cry again at the kind words from her father. Then she lifted her head and sat very erect.

"I'm going to be brave!" she said. "But I'm not going to give up hope. There must be a way out. Somebody will lend us the money."

The Rector shook his head.

"No, Peggy," he said. "I have thought it all over for a great many nights—I have not slept well lately—and I will not settle one debt by making another which I could never pay back. If I had been wise enough to ask some one at first, when I only owed a small sum, it would have been easy. But my foolish pride stood in my way, and it is too late now. You three must bear my punishment——" he broke off.

"Father!" cried Peggy, jumping up from her seat. "I don't care what I bear, so long as I have you to bear it with."

Tears came into the Rector's eyes, the scalding difficult tears of age, and he leaned his head for a moment against Peggy's warm young shoulder.

"There is your mother to tell!" he whispered at last. "I don't know how I am to tell her, Peggy."

"Wait a little," comforted Peggy. "Just a few days. She will have less time to be troubled in."

Poor Mr. Hewitt, ill, his nerves worn out with trouble and sleeplessness, seized at the little straw held out.

"You really think it would be better not to tell her at present?" he hesitated.

"I do. I do indeed," said Peggy, with the indomitable hope at the back of her mind that something must turn up; such misfortunes could not happen to her father.

"Well," he rose at last, "let us go to bed, Peggy. There is the Harvest Festival to-morrow."

Peggy kissed him good-night at his bedroom door, and whispered:

"You'll try to get some sleep? You won't lie awake thinking?"

"No. I shall sleep better now I have told you. My good little girl, what should I do without you?"

So Peggy went to her own room with a glow at her heart in spite of all the trouble, for there is always some happiness where people truly love one another.

Next day the Rector's daughter was very busy adding flowers to the wreaths and fringes of corn which garlanded the church, and which looked, when the oil lamps were lighted, like some wonderful mediæval decoration of gold upon the grey stone. The strongly marked features of the weather-beaten men of Little Pendleton and the comely, rosy faces of the women were suited to this background, and made part of the rich picture of gold and shadow harmonious human figures upon which the Rector's eyes rested when he went up into the pulpit.

He preached a very simple sermon from the text, "Give us this day our daily bread," and there was no word in it which has not been said often in every church belonging to the Teacher of that prayer. But there was

something behind the words which could be felt by every one—some bond of brotherhood and kindness drawing the Rector of Little Pendleton close to every member of the congregation who had ever been troubled about daily bread for those dependent on him. Mr. Hewitt was very near to little farmers who had lain awake at night listening while the wind and rain destroyed the fruits of a year's hard work. He knew just how those felt who went out on dull autumn days, and saw the black sheaves sprouting after a wet harvest, and could do nothing. He understood the reality of the disaster when a good horse dies, or a fine cow just calved. And yet in spite of all he loved God. He believed that God took thought for us. The simplicity of the Rector's faith spread through the country church among the gold and grey like an incense made from thyme and lavender and rosemary grown in little gardens they all knew.

At last came the peroration, and then a moment's silence. The Rector looked down with such an expression of affection and farewell that some women felt tears come to their eyes, and Robinson swore under his breath in that sacred place because he was so greatly moved. He guessed, instinctively, that the Rector was in some such trouble as he himself had known in the spring, and he realised the misery of it as no glib outsider ever can do.

Peggy had listened to it all with a heart so full that she was obliged to stare very hard at a fat vegetable marrow near the reading desk to prevent the tears coming, while Jack kicked the pew in front and whispered impatiently:

"I thought you wanted to be jolly at Harvest Festivals. I don't call this jolly."

Peggy shook her head but sat closer to the little lad; it seemed so hard that he must already begin to feel the shadow of care and sorrow: her movement caused

Tremaine to glance across and their eyes met. It was only for a second, but Peggy's heart beat fast with suddenly renewed hope, for he had not had time to conceal what he felt when he saw the two young Hewitts looking so wistful and childlike in that big pew against the grey walls.

Then came the hymn, and the strange organist, not knowing the limitations of the Little Pendleton organ, caused it to emit the most blood-curdling sounds amid the triumphant: "Now thank we all our God!"

Peggy sang from the depths of a great thankfulness. It was so easy for her generous nature to persuade her that she must have been in the wrong in regard to Tremaine. No doubt, she had seemed to snub him—she had not thrown over her other partners as she might have done after that time in the Inn garden—he was too proud to come after her when he had nothing to give and Lawry so much. He had nobly left her free to make her choice. Well, she would make it to-night in a way there was no mistaking.

With head erect and shining eyes she slipped through the congregation and out into the porch, awaiting her lover. He had his aunt with him, but no matter; he might come surrounded by a phalanx of a hundred maiden aunts and she would make nothing of them.

"Charley," she said, holding out her hand, "are you walking my way?"

"Thank you," he said formally. "I am so sorry. I have to take my aunt home."

He spoke so because no man can speak naturally when he is longing with his whole soul to cry out: "How sweet you are! Was there ever such sweetness in the world?" and he has to make a remark about his maiden aunt: or thinks he has, which comes to the same thing.

But Peggy could not know this, and stepped back into

the shadow of the porch corner with a feeling of actual, physical sickness. Wounded pride and love hurt so, that for a few moments the agony seemed unbearable. Then, dully, through the haze of pain, she saw the old farmer's widow from the end cottage talking to Mrs. Dunn. A moment later they were joined by the landlady of the Blue Lion.

"Won't you come back and have a bit of supper with us?" said the landlady to the old woman.

"Why, I have just asked her to take some with us," said the butcher's wife.

"Thanks, I'd promised Mrs. Dunn," said the widow, settling her bonnet strings and feeling very important.

Peggy watched them go along the path in front of her, and her own pain eased a little.

So, after all, it was this happy result of the Great Idea which brought her comfort in the saddest hour she had yet known.

"There *is* jolliness in the world!" she sobbed, as she ran crying across the dark garden. "I don't care! I don't care! I won't ever think anything different whatever happens! There always *is* jolliness somewhere!"

CHAPTER XXIV

QUEER WEATHER

WHEN the Rector came down from the pulpit, he felt he had said farewell to something very dear to him, the value of which he had never before realised; namely, the reverence of Little Pendleton. His delicate form of pride had been so subtly ministered to through all these years by the attitude of his parishioners that he had imagined himself humble. And now, before another Harvest Festival, his flock would have found out that he was no better than the very weakest of them. And yet he loved them more than he had ever done, and wanted their affection more.

It seemed to him as he dragged himself up to bed that he had been a very unfaithful steward to Little Pendleton. His ministry there had been a failure. And his wife and children must face the end of all the past easy, happy times because of him. It might even be necessary for him to exchange livings and leave the flowery rectory and the grey church and all the surroundings which were a part of their existence.

Next morning, an almost unprecedented thing happened: Mrs. Hewitt came down to breakfast, saying that the Rector was too ill to get up. At eleven o'clock Peggy took her father's temperature and found it to be a hundred and two. The doctor arrived about three, and by evening the whole of Little Pendleton had become aware that the Rector was seriously ill with a bad attack of influenza.

At breakfast time next morning, Robinson called and

asked to see Mrs. Hewitt, but that lady was still in the spare bedroom where she had migrated, taking an egg beaten up in a cup of tea, and saying to every one who approached that influenza was a straightforward and simple illness from which people invariably recovered in a few days.

So it was Peggy who went down into the study where Robinson stood by the writing-table much as he had done on that evening in the spring. But this time his errand was to pay instead of borrowing; and he said, holding out a five-pound note:

"I'll get the balance by the end of the week, somehow. It ought to have been paid before, but the minute you get a bit of money together it has to go—there never seems a chance——"

"I wish I needn't take it," said Peggy, straightforwardly, "but I must. Thank you very much, Mr. Robinson."

"I know what illness is," said Robinson, going across the hall. Then he stopped short and said with a great effort: "Tell the Rector he's to buck up and get well. Little Pendleton can't get on without him."

"He'll love to hear that," smiled Peggy, though her face was very white and tired.

"I wouldn't——" said Robinson, striking his right fist upon his palm, "I wouldn't change our Rector in his old coat—not for the Archbishop of York with a golden mitre on his head: nor yet wouldn't Little Pendleton."

But when Peggy went upstairs to give this message her father moaned deliriously and said, over and over again: "An unfaithful shepherd! An unfaithful shepherd!"

The business of nursing the new invalid and paying proper attention to the old one taxed Peggy's strength to the utmost, though Mary worked from early morn-

ing until late night like the good-hearted girl she was, and bought tinned salmon with her own earnings on her night out to tempt the invalid, because her father always fancied tinned salmon up to the very last.

But other dainties more suitable arrived at the rectory almost every hour, and in spite of Peggy's own unhappiness and her anxiety about her father, she still felt the joy which must come to all who receive great kindness when they are in trouble. It is a joy unlike any other, floating bright and clear above ordinary feeling, and yet having its root in our most inner place of love and tears.

But it is not a joy which makes people fat; rather, it has a tendency to fine away the body until the spirit seems to shine through, and when Ethel Torwood, returning from a round of autumn visits, came to call at the rectory, the coldness which had grown up between the two friends was dissipated at once by Peggy's appearance.

"Why, Pegs! Pegs!" she said, and began to cry, which was a very unusual thing for her to do.

"What's the matter?" said Peggy, naturally astonished.

"Don't!" wept Ethel, unable to stop now she was once started. "I can't bear to see you look so jolly and brave and yet—Oh! I've been a pig. I never will again. No man on earth is worth it."

Peggy made no reply to these incoherent sentences, beyond kissing her friend and saying how nice it was to see her back again. But as the two girls were seldom demonstrative with each other this meant more than might have appeared.

Later in the day Mr. Torwood arrived, pink and perturbed and important, with a pony cart weighed down with various delicacies and a bunch of orchids for Mrs. Hewitt, who donned her lace scarf and sat in her sofa

corner once more, enjoying herself and smiling sadly over the tea-cups.

Peggy brought in tea and was perhaps a little hurried and ungracious because some invalid's food for her father was on the fire, but Mr. Torwood stayed a long time and went away feeling more than ever that the Rector's wife was a woman whom it was a privilege to know.

Many people began to call after this, and they all had tea, and were all dreadfully sorry for poor Mrs. Hewitt, with a slight tendency to blame poor Mr. Hewitt ever so gently for having allowed himself to get ill when he owned such a delicate wife.

But Miss Tremaine was not of this company, and when she called and saw Peggy's thin face and heard the gay voice just as gay as ever, she said at parting:

"You're a brave girl, Peggy. I like pluck. But don't nurse yourself to death."

Peggy flushed, for she had never before been praised by this woman who was so near to the man she loved, while Mrs. Hewitt said from the sofa:

"Yes, we have indeed need of all our fortitude."

"Peggy looks more as if she needed a good holiday and plenty of beef tea," said Miss Tremaine.

After she had gone, Mrs. Hewitt sighed and said:

"A most unsympathetic woman. No nice feeling. But I daresay life is difficult with a nose like that!"

So the days and even weeks passed, until it was November, when the church lay always in a mist or was swallowed up into a starless night. No one could be found to take daily service and the bell hung silent in the grey tower. The birds were no longer singing. Tremaine used to feel as he splashed past on his bicycle that life was a dull affair; and this is no discredit to him as a knight, for all true knights have felt the same

when they were riding about spiking just ordinary dragons of the sort to be met with every day. The heat and the fervour, and even the pain of being wounded in killing the great green and golden dragon once and for all, is, really, nothing to it; the heavy dulness comes with the knowledge that there are dragons, dragons all the way, with dull brown scales and nothing handsome about them.

So that almost unbearable hour when Tremaine had walked in the lane beyond the garden hedge of his lady, and knew she awaited him, and remained away from her, had yet been fraught with a certain fierce joy of conquest over self. He renounced in an agony and yet there was a bitter splendour about the sacrifice. But now there was nothing but a dreary knowledge that he had behaved decently, so far as he knew how.

Sundays, however, were the worst days, because then he was apt to catch sight of Peggy with her little, fine feathers growing more like her father's, and her brave eyes laughing out at the world. In the end, he even longed for Lawry to come home, so that this intolerable state of things should be ended. If the fellow cared a hang for Peggy, he ought to be there, to see that she was not worked to death.

The same view prevailed in the tap-room of the Blue Lion, where Stocks thought more frequently than ever, but had no inspirations.

"Squire can't know what's going on," said Young Taylor. "If he knowed, he'd come."

"D'you think," snarled Stocks, "that he'll want to marry a couple of laths clapped together when he does come? The gentry likes an armful, ye fool!"

"She looks prettier than ever. She looks like a little lass just grown taller with her bit of a face and her being so straight up and down," muttered Young Taylor.

"Any chap might fancy her, so he might. Not that I don't like 'em fuller figured myself."

"There you go," said Stocks. "Just what I told you." Then he rose, knocked out his pipe and walked to the back door of the rectory where Mary appeared in answer to his knock, and the two stood in the chill darkness peering at each other over the lighted candle held by the maid.

"Well?" she said, goggling at him. "What now?"

"There's nothing the matter," he replied, walking in: then he turned upon her—"It's only this, Mary Symons, you've got to fatten Miss Peggy up."

"Go on!" said Mary, setting down the candle. "You don't mean to say you came here at this time o' night to tell me that!"

"I did, then," said Stocks. "And what's more, you'll have to do it. Make her eat butter. Soak her potatoes in dripping. Stir margarine with her porridge. Keep on with grease whenever you get a chance." He paused for a moment and lugged a bottle of cod-liver oil out of his pocket. "See that? It was meant for Young Mrs. Taylor's baby, but it can wait. You're to make her take that!"

"But she won't!" protested Mary, standing with dropped jaw and staring eyes. "She says cod-liver oil turns her stummick."

"Then she ought to keep her stummick in better control," retorted Stocks. "But give her it in her tea and she'll never know."

"She'll see the grease floating in a minute; she's that sharp," said Mary.

"Too sharp!" agreed Stocks. "But you can tell her it's just the cream being too thick. You women! You've no inishitive."

"What's that?" said Mary, indignant for her sex.

"Some useless thing or you men wouldn't have it all to yourselves."

"Mary, my girl," said Stocks, "it's what makes you put paraffin on fire while other lasses goes and lets the missis know they were late down."

"I don't! I never do! And I won't give Miss Peggy your old muck, so there!" said Mary very indignantly.

"Well," said Stocks, changing his tactics, "I'll be off then. It's nothing to me. I shall have done my best. But when Miss Peggy's gone thinner and thinner until she's skin and bone and then takes a cold and has nothing to stand up against it with, and dies, and you're putting flowers on her grave, you'll think of this here minute in this here kitchen."

"Boo-hoo!" wept Mary, suddenly overcome by this horrid picture. "I'll give her oil, then. I'm sure I don't want her to die no more than you do, Stocks, and it's a wicked, wicked shame of you to say so."

Then the kitchen door opened again upon the chilly mist outside, and the sexton tramped away, saying over his shoulder—

"Queer weather!"

"Ay! Queer weather, but we shall soon have passed the shortest day," said Mary, that being the proper response to this part of the country litany.

Thus it came to pass that Peggy, tasting a greasy, fish-like flavour in her cup of morning tea, poured the rest away without remark, because it was so kind of Mary to bring tea up at all in such a busy time. Later, after breakfast, she disposed secretly of a plate of tough toast soaked in margarine for fear of hurting Mary's feelings. But when, at eleven, that faithful handmaid appeared with a huge beaker of warm egg and milk all floating with oily particles, Peggy saw what was happening. And though she felt touched and truly grateful, it was the end of the cure.

"Gimme me oil back," said Stocks, peering through the kitchen door at dinner time. "Young Mrs. Taylor may as well have it. I shall tell her I wasted some of it, and she'll believe me and ask no questions. No wonder she's married and gotten a baby with Miss Peggy running round loose yet. A man likes something a bit more trustinger than Miss Peggy, so he does. You remember that, Mary, my lass, when you're walking out with Bill Walker. He won't think none the better of you for being too sharp. If a man comes into his own house and says a thing, he doesn't want a wife who can see round the corner to the other thing he doesn't say. If she can't help seeing she'd better keep it to herself and look silly."

"And is Bill to do the same?" retorted Mary with some spirit.

Stokes winked.

"He will, anyway. You don't think a man tells all he sees when he sits and smokes."

"Nor a woman doesn't—when she sits and sews!" said Mary.

"I'm not talking about married life to you, Mary," said Stocks with dignity; for he felt that it was time to close the argument finally lest he should be worsted. "It wouldn't be neither becoming or right. I was on'y stating that you don't want to see too sharp beforehand: and so I maintain."

Then he retired, leaving Mary vaguely conscious of her own lack of propriety.

CHAPTER XXV

THE TREMAINES AT BREAKFAST

THE breakfast room was dank with the raw air from the fields outside, open windows being to Miss Tremaine not a convenience but a principle. The flame of the lamp burned dully in the half daylight, and Tremaine came quickly into the room, fresh, alert, vigorous, ready for his day's work in Melbury.

"I'm afraid you'll be tired," said Miss Tremaine, pouring out the coffee. "I heard you go down into the yard at five."

"Do I look tired?" he said, opening his paper with a laugh. "The man's ill. Somebody must do the work."

"You work too hard," said Miss Tremaine.

"It's the only thing that keeps me out of mischief," he said gaily. Then his own words struck home to him and a shadow passed across his face; it was true enough. If he did not work until he was dog-tired every night and rise to hard work again before daylight, he could not get through this winter without disaster. The dragons that try to drag down every young man in Tremaine's case, were always on the watch for him. He had to wear his heavy armour all the time, and that is a terrible strain for even the strongest knight.

"I went to the rectory yesterday," remarked Miss Tremaine, in the desultory way which people employ at breakfast. "Peggy Hewitt is working hard, too. I can't think why Mr. Lawry doesn't come home."

"Business in America," said Tremaine, occupied with the marmalade.

"Wonderful man of business! I remember my brother Arthur used to say so, years ago."

"I didn't know they were acquainted with each other," said Tremaine, looking up.

"Oh, only in business. They lived in the same town when this Lawry was young, and I remember Arthur asking old Lawry, the father, about my investments." She sighed. "Poor Arthur!"

"He's gone, now, poor chap!" said Tremaine, and that was all the blame cast by these two upon the man whose handling of Miss Tremaine's fortune had proved so disastrous to both of them.

It was a subject upon which they rarely touched, and they were glad to be released from further discussion by the entrance of Jack Hewitt, purposeful, books on back, in a hurry to get to school.

"'Morning, Miss Tremaine. Raw day! 'Morning, Mr. Charley. Mother says, will you please be so kind as to order the things on that list from Brown, the chemist, in Melbury. To come out by carrier this afternoon." Then he relaxed a little and glanced rather wistfully at the well-spread breakfast table. "It's a nasty time when people are ill, isn't it? Nobody there when you come in. And nobody minding much even if you have toothache. I had such awful toothache last week that I was obliged to cry just a little at night, behind that dark place near the kitchen dresser. And Mary thought at first it was Spirits, but when she saw it was only me she put pepper and brown paper on and was sorry. The pepper smarted and did no good, but it made me feel a bit better, her being sorry. It does make you feel better, even if the things are no good, when people are sorry, doesn't it?"

He looked at them with the oddest expression of confidence and knowledge of the world on his chubby, round face. And Miss Tremaine, who was hard to most people

but possessed a tender spot for little boys which her nephew had found out long ago, replied in her sharp way:

"Come to us next time. We'll give you something better than pepper."

Then the two young gentlemen went about their business, Tremaine taking Jack to school on the carrier of his motor-bicycle; and the glorious moment when Bobby Parker ran out in the mud to see the fun and shouted: "Hooray!" made up for a great deal.

"Come in for a game of cards to-night?" said Tremaine, ready to start. "What's your game?"

"Snap," said Jack, swaggering. "I'll bring me own pack. Shall we say six?"

"Six it is," said Tremaine, very solemn. "By the way, I usually play chocolate points. I'd better bring some out with me, as you're providing the cards."

"All right," said Jack. "That in red papers, rather hard and not too sweet. It's girls that like a soft, milky brand."

Thus began the series of gambling engagements upon which the two gentlemen of Little Pendleton were destined to look back with a great deal of happiness, and which laid the foundation of a very true friendship.

CHAPTER XXVI

A SECOND OPINION

ALMOST everybody has had occasion, at some time or other, to endure what Mrs. Hewitt and Peggy went through at the end of November. The daily visit of the doctor who knows, as no one but a doctor can do, the supreme value of a hopeful atmosphere; the cheerful report from the invalid's room; the persistent temperature which "means nothing"; the comfortable assurance that the patient will be down next week. And when next week arrives, the whole thing over again; and at last a day when the doctor comes down from the sick room more robustly cheerful than ever to suggest in a casual way that two heads are better than one—that there may be some simple remedy which the present medical man has not thought of—that perhaps it would be better to have a second opinion.

These words fall on the heart as do the first drops of cold sea-water on the face of one sheltering on a high rock from a rising sea. The tide may turn—we are brave and feel sure it will—but we have felt that drop of sea-water on our faces.

So Mrs. Hewitt said, trembling a little: "You don't fear it is anything serious? You—you don't think he is not going to get better?"

"Of course not, my dear lady. We simply want to get the Rector well as quickly as possible, that is all," the doctor answered, rubbing his hands cheerfully. But he gave Peggy a look which caused her to accompany

him to the end of the drive, and when they were out of earshot he said, in quite a different tone:

"You must forgive me if I ask you a question. We doctors have to be indiscreet in that way, you know."

"Yes?" said Peggy anxiously.

"I want to know if your father has any secret anxiety? Is anything preying on his mind that you know of?"

"There have been money difficulties," said Peggy.

"Oh! Nothing more than that?" said the doctor airily; he was very comfortably off.

"Goodness!" said Peggy sharply, irritable with anxiety and lack of sleep. "Who wants more than that?"

Then the doctor pursued his morning round, thinking her a good girl, but not a patch on her mother, who really was a sweet woman.

When Peggy returned to the house she found Mrs. Hewitt carrying a cup and plate across the hall.

"What are you doing, Mother?" she exclaimed.

"I'm taking your father's milk up," said Mrs. Hewitt. "It is time I began to try and help a little." Then she paused, and after a moment went on again: "You don't think there is anything serious?"

"No, no, dear!" answered Peggy reassuringly.

"Then what did the doctor want to say to you?"

"He wanted to know if Father were worrying about anything," hesitated Peggy.

Mrs. Hewitt sighed.

"I shall pity your father, indeed," she said, "if he gets to be like me. No one knows how hard it is to escape worry excepting those whose health depends on the avoidance of it. Life really bristles with worries. Only this morning Mary broke my dear little blue cup which I use for cough-mixture always. I'm sure I don't know what I shall do when I next get a cold and have to take cough mixture again."

So saying, she climbed up the shallow stairs and entered her husband's room.

"Why, Agnes," he said, holding out his thin, transparent hand for the cup and plate, "this is good of you. But could no one else be found to do this? You are not strong enough to wait on me."

A faint, most delicate flush crept from Mrs. Hewitt's cheeks to her pretty, faded hair and down her neck. Her husband's surprise had made her ashamed.

"Then, drink your milk, dear," she said, sitting on the bed by him. Then when he had finished, she took one of those transparent hands in hers. "You are not worrying about money again, are you, dear? Worry is so bad for you. And if any serious financial trouble were to overtake us, I am sure some one would step forward. People are so kind."

He pressed her hand without speaking.

"And you know what you have always said in the pulpit about the lilies of the field and the sparrows—so beautifully said, James, though it is a long while since I heard you preach—and now is the time to carry it out."

"Ah, Agnes!" he said. "Had I but practised what I preached!"

"Every saint on earth has said that at some time or other," replied Mrs. Hewitt. "You are feeling low, James. Influenza always has that effect. I remember myself, after one attack, thinking I had a disfigured face and should have to wear a mask, when it was only a slight rash from taking so much bromide."

But she spoke differently to Peggy downstairs.

"I am distressed about your father," she said, weeping. "Oh, Peggy, we have been so poor, and I always thought I was miserable, and now I find I have been happy all the time."

As Peggy heard those words, she felt nearer to her mother than she had ever done before, but they had always been so far apart, in spite of her warm affection, that she could only say awkwardly:

"Don't trouble. Father will get well. I am sure he will be all right soon."

Later in the day the other doctor came over from Melbury, looking very wise and well-dressed and important, and agreed with Peggy in such impressive terms that Mrs. Hewitt was reassured. But still things went on much as before, and the Rector grew a very little weaker every day. Peggy read the newspaper aloud to him and he sometimes listened and sometimes did not, but one morning there came an item of news which roused his attention, though he was nearly asleep.

"Read that again, Peggy," he said. "I scarcely took it in. Lord Headingly had a seizure?"

"Yes. Not severe. He may live for years," said Peggy, who was very tired and had read on mechanically without noticing what she was coming to. "You know old Mrs. Taylor lived for twenty years after she had a stroke."

"I was going to see him," said the Rector in an agitated way. "As soon as ever I could travel, I was going to ask him to help us. But it's no use now."

"Never mind," said Peggy. "I have a sort of feeling inside that something nice is sure to happen. Just you wait and see."

And at that moment, as if in answer to Peggy's words, Mrs. Hewitt appeared with a letter in her hand.

"This has just come for you, Peggy," she said, refraining with an effort from looking curious.

Peggy took the letter carelessly and then saw the handwriting.

"Why! Mr. Lawry! He's back in London, then!"

"Nice of him to let us know," commented Mrs. Hewitt, still elaborately casual.

"He says," remarked Peggy, reading, "that he will be home next week."

Then she looked up suddenly and saw the hope in her parents' eyes.

"We shall be pleased to see him back," said Mrs. Hewitt after a pause.

"Why, yes," said the Rector.

Peggy took up the tea-tray and went out. Nothing more was said, either then or afterwards, because the Rector for once asserted his authority and absolutely forbade Mrs. Hewitt to speak to Peggy on the subject of Lawry. But if he had searched the world for a method of coercing his daughter to accept a rich suitor, he could not have found one more effective.

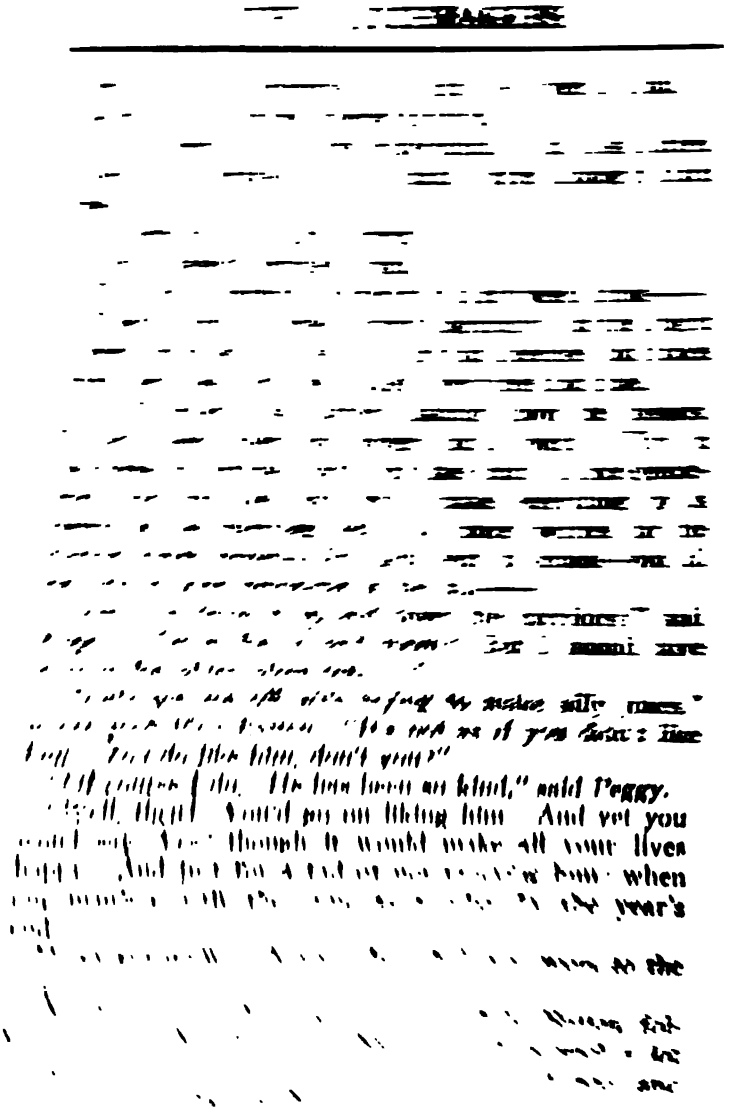
On first going out, Peggy walked quickly about the garden, feeling she must have air and solitude and movement or stifle; but before long she turned into the road in order to see Miss Batten about a long-delayed matter of business; air and movement she must have, but there was no leisure to walk about a garden picking her emotions to pieces.

She went, thin and vivid, down the village street, giving jolly greetings to all she met, gay Peggy of Little Pendleton; as she would be while there was breath left in her. But it was now the bright, clear gaiety of a little fire burning in a field in winter, not the easy laughter of water running in summer woods.

Miss Batten saw her from a side window that looked upon the long street and hurried to meet her.

"Well, better late than never."

"I've not been able to get here before," said Peggy. "I wanted to tell you not to wait for me any longer. You



Peggy shook her head.

"I'm not offended at all! Only I'm so bothered. I don't know what to do. I really don't know what to do."

But as she went back down the street, where a smell of hot pastry came from cottage ovens, it being Friday, and pleasant voices rang out, and all seemed so dear and familiar, she began to think that she could never be quite unhappy if she still lived in Little Pendleton with some one who was kind to her; and Lawry was very kind.

She always came back to the thought of his kindness in order to stifle another voice that cried out within her, hurting her, but which she did not really understand: the voice which protests in every woman against the man who is not her true mate.

But a girl, even as clear-sighted and familiar with the facts of life as Peggy, can know nothing of the reality of marriage. And yet it required no Iphigenia to feel that a marriage which makes everybody happy but the bride might perhaps be a right one.

When she reached home the afternoon post had come in, and there was another letter from Garston, the Melbury lawyer, to add to the pile of unopened business envelopes accumulating on the study table. The Rector was not allowed to see them, and Mrs. Hewitt did not care to open them, lest their contents should upset her nerves, while Peggy dared not do so, for her father had always been captiously particular about his correspondence remaining untouched. Not that he had minded all his household knowing what he received, until the business of the money-lending started, but it was his foible and, in a way, part of his character.

Then Jack came in from his gambling bout with his winnings in his pocket, delighted to give them to Peggy.

"B'lieve I could play Snap against all England," he

boasted, standing with his sturdy legs well apart. "But it was a hot 'un to-night. Three tablets of choc on every game."

"Does Charley like it, too?" said Peggy wistfully.

"Loves it; bless you!" answered Jack. "Laughs like anything, and says he doesn't know what he did for reckkeration before we started. And Miss Tremaine stands near and laughs, too—only she has rather a thin kind of laugh, but she can't help that, can she, Peggy? And we have cakes all round and glasses of lemonade—at least, they don't, always, but I do—and I can tell you, it's ripping!"

"It sounds nice," said Peggy.

"Poor old Pegs!" said Jack. "I'll ask them to ask you, too, sometimes, but I'm afraid you couldn't come every night, because it's a man's party. Mr. Charles said so."

"Does he seem jolly *all* the time?" asked Peggy.

"Every minute. Keeps you in roars. I do think we ought to send some of his jokes up to *Comic Cuts* and make a fortune. There was one about a guinea-pig's tail—you know, Pegs, a guinea-pig hasn't got a tail, and —well——"

"Oh!" cried Peggy. "Is that Father's bell?"

She knew otherwise, but was obliged to stay this recital of Tremaine's doings lest she should scream. Her nerves were fretted by worry and overwork and uncertainty until she felt ready to welcome almost any solution which promised certainty and peace.

CHAPTER XXVII

A CRISIS

ON Tuesday morning, Mrs. Hewitt remained in bed for breakfast. Habits of energy and unselfishness are not regained in a few days, and she felt tired, so preferred eating her toast and reading her novel in peace. Jack had gone to school. The Rector was dressing in order to sit up a little while, according to doctor's orders. Peggy was in the kitchen helping Mary. The birds sang through the open door. Then upon all this peace doom suddenly descended.

"Miss!" said Stocks at the door, "I want to speak to you."

"Well, what is it?" said Peggy, going forward with a cup in her hand.

Stocks shielded his mouth with his horny palm.

"It's bailiffs. Bailiffs come to tek an inventory. They say there was notice sent through Lawyer Garston."

The cup fell with a crash and Peggy stood, white and trembling, facing the distressed old man.

"Oh, Stocks! It can't be true! There must be some mistake."

Stocks shook his head.

"I know the men by sight. They're Sheriff's Officers, sure enough. They was at a farm in Great Pendleton, a bit back. You bought that preserving pan at the Sale, if you remember."

Peggy remembered. She had gone in her pink print gown on a sunny morning and gaily carried the brass pan ho- with hei across the fields. And the people

who owned it had felt as she did now. Her heart opened a little wider in that moment, as the heart does in all good sorrow.

"What are we to do, Stocks?" she said at last.

"You cheer up, Miss. Some bailiffs is real nice fellows," interposed Mary. "Give 'em plenty to eat and treat 'em decent, and they'll have a joke with you as soon as anybody. I don't suppose they like being bailiffs, poor chaps, on'y they're brought up to the trade and there you are!"

Thus Mary, with her charity, covered even bailiffs, and Peggy said in a low tone:

"I suppose they must go on taking the inventory until I see what can be done."

"But you mustn't tell the Rector, Miss Peggy," said Stocks anxiously.

"Nor yet the Missis," urged Mary. "We don't want her all in hysterics on our hands at a time like this."

Peggy pressed her hand, damp with washing up, against her forehead.

"There's nobody to ask," she murmured, and she looked so frail and girlish, standing there, that Stocks and Mary were touched. "I must go to Mr. Torwood," she added finally.

"Leave the bailiffs to me, then," said Stocks. "I'll manage 'em till you come back, and nobody shall know a thing about it unless Mary here tells 'em."

"Strike me dead that minute if I ever do!" exclaimed Mary indignantly.

So Peggy went upstairs, put on her out-door things, and called to Mrs. Hewitt in passing that she was going out for an hour.

"This morning! With the pheasants from the Hall to cook!" exclaimed Mrs. Hewitt, sitting up in bed.

Peggy, however, was already downstairs giving last directions about the bread sauce in case she were late,

but as she turned to go Stocks stumbled breathless into the kitchen.

"Mr. Lawry!" he panted. "Coming through the churchyard! See 'em starting inventering in the garden: I told him they was two new man-servants; rough but very 'andy: he didn't believe: seen 'em afore, too! Oh, Lor'! Miss Peggy, you're a-done for now! You're a-done for now!"

"Is he talking to them?" cried Peggy. "Oh—I must go!"

"Take off that old hat first," said Mary, pulling it off from behind. "Oh! Excuse me snatching: but while there's life there's 'ope, Miss Peggy."

"Is Miss Hewitt there?" said Lawry's voice at the door.

"Yes; will you come into the study?" said Peggy, walking before him.

"Come! Come!" he said, when they were in the full light from the window. "No need to look like that, you know. We'll soon make it all right. I have spoken to the men already."

"You can't make it right without paying," said Peggy, flushing crimson and then going very white again.

"Well, I always carry my cheque-book with me. A man's only half a man without his cheque-book. Can you lend me a pen, and I'll just call those fellows in here, if I may. It's the easiest conjuring trick in the world. Give you my word it is, Miss Peggy!"

And in truth, owing to Lawry's experienced hand, Peggy found this to be so; for by eleven o'clock the two men were departing across the lawn with a queer air of satisfied but puzzled conspirators.

"And now," said Lawry, re-entering the study by the long window, "I must be rushing away, too. Wish to goodness I could stay. I am obliged to catch the mid-day train back to town: some further bother about those

oil shares I went to look after in America. Nothing serious, and I shall be back again for good next week. Then," he took her hand and held it while he continued: "Then I shall come to call on you again, Miss Peggy. Shall you be pleased to see me?"

There was a pause.

"Yes," said Peggy.

"Thank you," said Lawry, pressing the hand. "Oh, I say, I can't go! Hang the oil shares!"

Then came a violent ringing from a bell upstairs.

"That's Father! Something must be the matter. I must run up and see," said Peggy.

"All right!" said Lawry, glancing at his watch. "Well, I've just time to do it. I suppose I had better go. Good-bye, Peggy."

"Good-bye," called Peggy, already on her way upstairs.

She found Mr. Hewitt seated half dressed on the side of the bed, looking very ill.

"Those men on the lawn!" he said. "Who are they?"

"Men—men coming to look for work," stammered Peggy, seizing hold of Stocks' idea in her desperate need.

"Have I fallen so low that you must lie to spare me?" said the Rector in a dreadful voice.

"No! No!" she cried. "Only you have been so ill. I—we thought you ought not to know. And they have gone now—gone for good."

"Without their money?"

"N-no. Not exactly without it," said Peggy, as if it had been a sort of half arrangement.

"Then who paid?"

"Well—a friend—perhaps he would rather you didn't know——"

"Who paid?" repeated the Rector.

"Mr. Lawry," said Peggy.

"I can't allow that," said the Rector, trying to keep quiet because of the thudding of his heart. "This should not have happened. I ought to have been consulted. I told you, Peggy, that I would not contract a fresh debt to any one. Matters ought to take their course. Then, if we were beggared, we should at least be honest and free."

"I am very sorry," said Peggy dully, going to the window and staring out at the December day. She never forgot the look of the sodden lawn and the black trees at the moment. "I did my best."

"My poor child!" said her father. "Too much has fallen upon you already, but I shall take the matter into my own hands now. I will write at once to Mr. Lawry."

Peggy turned sharp round, her brief moment of hopelessness already over.

"You dear old goose of a father!" she cried excitedly, cheeks flushed, eyes shining. "Can't you *see?* I'm going to marry Mr. Lawry."

"Lawry!" echoed Mr. Hewitt. "But are you sure you really wish to do so? You are not sacrificing yourself for our sakes?" he pursued anxiously.

"Do I look as if I were being sacrificed?" she said.

"You look radiant, dear, I must confess," said the Rector tenderly. "Pray God, you may always look as happy."

And this was a natural hope on his part, for the triumph of a great sacrifice for the sake of love does produce for the time being such high exhilaration that even those who experience it believe themselves to be happy. But it is something more pure and high and flamelike even than happiness.

So, all day long, Peggy went about in that strange, unearthly light, and it made everything look glorious; even the path of matrimony gleamed before her as a road which would be always illumined by that same

radiance, so that nothing in it could ever seem revolting or mean.

But at evening, Peggy's exhilaration began to die down a little; it lasts so short a time and the reality of sacrifice so long. And she could not help thinking of Tremaine. Worn out and overstrung as she was, she wanted him to put his arms about her and tell her it was all right, which was an illogical desire in a girl who had just decided to marry somebody else; only, of course, love ceases to be love when there is room for logic in it. So, as she could not feed the flame of love in her heart, she fanned the flame of sacrifice there until all her heart seemed filled with warmth and light. Women have always done the same, and perhaps that was why He who was a sacrifice loved them so when He was on earth, even the worst and frailest.

It was about six o'clock when Tremaine came to the Rectory, as if in answer to Peggy's desire.

"Is that Charley at the door?" said Mr. Hewitt when a message of inquiry was given to him. "Let him come up and talk to me for half an hour. I should like to hear the news of the village."

So Tremaine came up and sat by the bedside and talked in his pleasant voice of the people and things which interested them both. The engagement of Lord St. Maldon, who was the rich young man of the county; Mrs. Robinson's father's death and the bit of money come to them; the new cure for apple pest; the new man at Elmbury Vicarage. All things not too disturbing and yet with a gentle, real interest. As Peggy moved softly about the room preparing for the invalid's night, it was like hearing the crow's call above quiet trees—as peaceful and natural and of the life they lived.

Tremaine looked very virile and reposeful by the side of the elderly man on the bed. His lean face and

steady eyes drew Peggy's glance that way in spite of herself. At last he rose to go, but the Rector put out a nervous hand.

"Wait a minute. Have you no more news?"

"No," said Tremaine, glancing involuntarily at Peggy.

"The village doesn't know, then?"

"Time's up," said Peggy, coming up to the bed. "I'm afraid you must go, Charley."

The Rector glanced at Peggy's face.

"Very well," he said, sinking back on his pillows. "I am very tired to-night."

Then Tremaine went away, but once on the stairs he stopped short.

"Peggy! Is there anything wrong?" he whispered.

"Nothing—now," said Peggy.

"Did Lawry——?"

"Yes."

"Oh, that's all right, then! Good-night."

"Good-night." And Peggy was back again in her father's room.

But down in Little Pendleton they were less easily satisfied, and Stocks was surrounded at the Blue Lion by a group of eager questioners.

"Surely," said the landlady, drawing him aside into the sacred precincts of the bar, "this is not true that I hear, Stocks?"

"What?" said Stocks, at bay.

"About them having bailiffs in at the Rectory?"

Stocks stared hard into the mug of beer with which the landlady had presented him: but he saw nothing save beer.

"I'm glad you've come to me, Mum," he replied slowly and hesitatingly. "It does you credit. No he-say and she-say for you, but di-rect to the fountain head." Then, suddenly, he saw daylight through the bottom of the mug, and regained his own air of innocent assurance.

"I wouldn't tell everybody," he continued confidentially. "But I know I can trust you, Mrs. Jenkins. It happened this a-way. The men got to the Rectory by a mistake, as well they might, houses been so alike that you would wonder any one ever did tell one from another—four walls—front door and back—chimneys—never nothink different."

"What made them go away?" said the landlady.

"Me," responded Stocks. "I just spoke a word to them and they went. They went like lambs."

"They came here," said the landlady.

"Oh!" said Stocks, a little startled, but non-committal.

"They told a different tale."

"They would!" said Stocks. "Bailiffs has got to be liars, all on 'em. They can't help it. Bailiffing does something to you, like tailoring. I never knew a tailor that wasn't quarrelsome."

"You mean everything has come all right, somehow," said the landlady, disregarding Stocks' embroideries.

"I do," said Stocks.

"That's what I wanted to know," said the landlady. "Here's your clean pipe, Stocks."

But Little Pendleton was not content so to leave it, and a tale went round in which the new Squire figured as a hero of melodrama, snatching the girl from ruin with one hand and paying her father's creditors with the other.

"Well, Miss Peggy's all right now," said Young Taylor. "No man pays good money down unless he's going to get the girl."

"Who said he did pay anything?" demanded Stocks angrily. "Say that again and I leave my silver watch to your brother Tom."

"I'm sorry, Stocks," apologised Young Taylor. "It's what everybody says."

"What everybody says is nearly always a lie," retorted Stocks.

"Well, if I was—a lass—I'd sooner have—Mr. Charles," puffed a pacific man in a far corner.

"Pschah!" said Stocks. "If you was a woman, you'd do like the rest—go where you could get most."

"Aye, aye!" said the other men, nodding appreciatively from their places among the warm shadows.

"You'd wonder why you'd ever been so crazed of a partickler lass," discoursed Stocks in the full firelight, gratified by receiving his due. "I mind Sally Watson with fifty pounds to her fortin', and I could have had her. And I wouldn't, because she squinted. The times I've kicked myself since!"

"Women would be all right if it wasn't for their tongues. I never can make out why they want to gossip as they do," assented Young Taylor eagerly.

"Born so, I s'pose," said Stocks. "If I could meet a woman without a tongue, I'd marry again, danged if I wouldn't!"

"Ha! Ha!" laughed all the men, delighted, for there is every reason to think that this same old joke will serve during æons to come, as it has already served for æons already past, such is the wonderful economy of nature.

But it was on the whole a joking, jolly Little Pendleton which retired to rest that night; and even those who had taken odds against Peggy's chances were flinging down their losses on queer, old-flounced dressing tables with a good heart. The lonely, secret longing in everybody, be they ever so toil-worn and disappointed, to see "happiness ever after," was being satisfied at last.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE UNEXPECTED

THE Rector came downstairs for the first time the next afternoon, and it seemed strange to see him occupying the sacred sofa between the window and the fire while Mrs. Hewitt sat in an ordinary arm-chair. The day was fine, with a clear, pale sunshine, and the Rector's face was illuminated by it as he lay upon the sofa. Peggy was unspeakably thankful to see him there, and when Mary brought in a packet of mint rock on the tea-tray as a sort of welcome back, and the Rector thanked her with tears of weakness in his eyes, Peggy was obliged to make a silly joke lest Mary and Mrs. Hewitt and she, herself, should all begin to cry together, so charged with happy emotion was the air.

Then Stocks had to come in, and he felt no inclination to tears, though he was truly glad to see the Rector once more.

"Time you was about again," he said. "Miss Peggy does her best, but she can't go up into the pulpit and preach. And we're all tired of strange parsons. They come to Little Pendleton as if they was a dove with a olive leaf and us stranded back o' the world. And the town 'uns will talk about crops to make us feel at home, when all the time we're holding our stummicks in so as not to burst out laughing."

"A town clergyman has no opportunity——" began Mr. Hewitt.

"Let him tell us about factories and docks and things he does know, then," said Stocks. "Begging your par-

don for interrupting you, sir. Anyhow, it'll be a real treat to hear your old sermon about the wheat and the tares again, for you do understand a bit about farming."

"Ha! Ha!" laughed Mr. Hewitt, for the first time since the beginning of his illness.

And it was upon this happy note that he went upstairs again to bed. In the evening Mrs. Hewitt and Peggy sat alone by the drawing-room fire while the Rector already slept the sleep of healthy fatigue. The two ladies were both stitching, and after a long period of silence Peggy unconsciously gave a deep sigh. Mrs. Hewitt glanced across at the girl's face, and then her gaze focussed. She had not noticed before how thin and vivid and small that face had grown during the past weeks.

"You have been overworking, Peggy," she said. "You must take it more easily now or Mr. Lawry will scold."

"I've not given him the right to do that yet," said Peggy, rousing herself with an effort. "That's one of the things I shall leave out of the marriage service."

"But there is nothing—— Oh! you were joking again, Peggy. It is a good thing you can take life so lightly."

"I'm so glad Father is better," said Peggy hastily.

"Yes," answered Mrs. Hewitt. Then she said something which she undoubtedly never would have said but for the emotional atmosphere in which she had spent the afternoon. "Peggy, I wanted you to marry Lawry because I know how hard it is to be poor. I could not bear to think of you struggling and struggling as I have been obliged to do—always hemmed in and thwarted by the lack of money."

"You have been happy," said Peggy in a low tone, looking at the fire.

"Ah! but I have only now found that out. All my married life, excepting just at the very first, I have

thought I was miserable. It was only when I feared to lose your father that I found out we had been very happy. I did not want you to go through twenty years like mine, Peggy, shut in this little place, with no outside interests, and perhaps ill-health." She got up, most unusually restless, and walked about the room. "You like Lawry, Peggy? You really want to marry him!"

There was a long silence.

"I am going to marry him," said Peggy at last. "I should not do that unless I wanted to, should I?"

"I don't know," said Mrs. Hewitt, still walking up and down. "I don't know." She paused in front of her daughter. "There's Charley Tremaine."

Peggy's face flamed crimson at the unexpected remark.

"Well?" she said.

"Did you really care for him?"

"Whatever I did, it is over now," said Peggy, hiding her trembling hands under her work.

"But you did care for him once?"

"Yes," said Peggy, ceasing to tremble and sitting erect: she was not going to deny her love, though it had proved to be so mistaken.

"If you thought he loved you still, should you go on caring for him?" pursued Mrs. Hewitt, following some purpose of her own.

"I—I suppose so," said Peggy, looking with a startled, anxious expression at her mother.

"Even if you were married to Lawry?"

"No," said Peggy, flushing crimson again. "I should try not. I should not let myself."

Mrs. Hewitt sat down again by the fire, thinking deeply.

"It's no use!" she said at last. "I simply dare not let you marry Lawry and then find out. It is too dangerous."

"What do you mean?" said Peggy.

"Just this—Charley came here to propose to you the day after Lawry's dance at the Blue Lion, and I sent him away."

Peggy went very white, but did not speak.

"I dare say you'll never forgive me," said Mrs. Hewitt. "But if you ever have children of your own, you'll know what it has cost me to tell you this."

She looked wistfully at her daughter's pale, averted face, but there was no sign of relenting. Then she gathered her things together and went towards the door, not daring to say good-night to her child.

But at the sound of the closing door Peggy jumped up and ran after her into the hall.

"Mother! You're going without saying 'Good-night!'" she called breathlessly.

"I didn't think you would care to, Peggy," said Mrs. Hewitt: and this dreadful humility went like a sword through Peggy's tender heart.

"You only did it because you loved me! You only did it because you wanted me to be happy!" she said.

In this dark moment the tune to which Peggy's life was set rang out unmistakably; it always must do so.

"And after all, my dear," said Mrs. Hewitt gently, "I think Charley has seen that I was right; that he ought not to make a young girl waste the best years of her life in a hopeless engagement."

"Yes," said Peggy. "Well, it's all over and done with. We won't speak of it any more, Mother!"

"But what are you going to do about Lawry?" said Mrs. Hewitt, more in her usual tone.

"I don't know," hesitated Peggy. "He has been so kind." She paused; then burst forth: "I don't believe I can ever marry him now. I can't tell why, but it makes such a tremendous difference, finding out that Charley came to ask me once."

"You may go on feeling like that until you are a faded,

middle-aged woman, and he falls in love with somebody young enough to be your daughter," said Mrs. Hewitt, getting back into her old attitude very quickly, because she was not of those who can stay for more than a breathing space on a high plane of emotion.

"Then you and Father will always have me at home," said Peggy.

"Yes. That would be a great comfort," said Mrs. Hewitt, a little doubtfully; for she already began to see herself with a faded daughter growing pinched at the nose-end, about the house, and to dislike the prospect, though there was no doubt she would enjoy the attendance.

Then they kissed again, but with the old placid kindness, and the long day came to an end as the longest days will do. At first when Peggy lay down, she slept the dead, dreamless sleep of utter fatigue, but about three o'clock she wakened again to all her difficulties: and at that hour of the night when vitality is lowest they seemed to be too great for her. Every way she turned to escape from them seemed barred by an unsurmountable wall. There was no light of sacrifice, because she had almost made up her mind that she could not marry any one but Tremaine, happen what might. The knowledge that he had once actually come to ask her to be his wife had raised a storm of feeling in her of which she had never dreamed herself capable. As she had misjudged him, so her generous nature ran out now to meet him, to beg his pardon, to make up to him in her heart, though he could never know it.

And she was no fool, so she realised for herself the danger which her mother had suggested. If she were to marry Lawry and Tremaine came to her at last, what would she do?

She would keep faithful to her husband. So much she was able to promise. But she might easily spoil three

lives in the process. For one second she glimpsed the agonising attempt of married women to turn gratitude into love, and knew she was not of those who could ever succeed.

About daylight she got up and watched for Tremaine to come across the yard. She had an instinct that she should know then what to do.

There had been a slight frost in the night. She saw him come from the house very clearly. His tall figure stood out against the white side of the cow-stable.

Then she knew. It would be a sin to marry any other man, feeling as she felt then. A sin, not only to herself, but to her unborn children. She did not think this last, but she felt it in her sudden, fierce revulsion from the idea of marriage with Lawry.

A little later the bell sounded for the early Sunday service. A curate from Great Pendleton was taking duty, and Peggy found her father seated by his window with an expression of great peace on his face. She had not courage to tell him she had changed her mind about Lawry, and went down to meet the postman instead.

"Glad to hear the Rector's better," said the man heartily: and the sound of the words floated up to the room above and deepened Mr. Hewitt's sense of peace and thankfulness.

He opened the prayer-book and began reading the Psalms of David, that immortal poem for all men who have made foolish, human mistakes and been sorry and gone to God for help.

"Here are your letters, Father," said Peggy, for the Rector now insisted that all his correspondence should be brought straight up to him.

Mrs. Hewitt came in at the same time and began opening hers.

"The Torwoods—so kind——" she murmured. "They are sending an invalid chair."

"Here, Agnes," said the Rector, holding out a letter and shielding his face with his hand.

"Oh! James!" said Mrs. Hewitt, pale and yet glad.

"Mother, what is it?" said Peggy.

"Lord Headingly is dead. He has left your father five hundred pounds!"

"Oh, Father! Then we shall be free. We need owe nobody a penny."

"I shall never be free from the obligation I owe to Mr. Lawry," said the Rector. "We can none of us ever forget that, Peggy."

"I must be off to early service," said Peggy.

Her father opened his lips and tried to bid his daughter make some special thanksgiving for God's goodness, but he could not say the words; that curious delicacy or reticence of which he was so ashamed held him dumb.

"It is a lovely morning," was all he said.

But Peggy knew what was in his mind, and during the next quiet half hour, she did indeed feel very near to a God who wanted every one to be happy.

Then came morning service, and luncheon with the Great Pendleton curate, who possessed a clerical voice and red hands, but also a fervent desire to make the world better than he found it, which atoned for everything else. And by this time Mrs. Hewitt had reached the stage of being greatly annoyed by the smallness of the legacy.

"Five hundred pounds, to Lord Headingly, was only like our giving a crossing sweeper sixpence," she said. "It ought to have been a couple of thousand or nothing."

But when Mr. Hewitt lay on the sofa that afternoon with his family about him, and looked out upon the peaceful garden, and the familiar churchyard hedge, the grey tower of his church behind it, he did indeed feel

a sense of joy and relief and gladness which no words can describe. He seemed to have lived through a period of darkness and to have come out into a serene and heavenly Sabbath more beautiful than any he had ever imagined.

"Truly the Lord is gracious. Truly there is a God that judgeth the earth," he murmured to himself as he lay there.

And though perhaps our God sees differently and may not think it wise to influence rich relatives either way, it is quite certain that He understands and is glad when good men give thanks as the Rector did that evening.

CHAPTER XXIX

CINDERELLA'S COACH

THIS beatific state of convalescence quickly passes, however, and the next one forces tired people to bind the daily burden again upon shoulders still too weak for it. Life becomes an effort, and the convalescent looks back with longing to the quiet hours in bed which seemed so tedious at the time.

So when Peggy came into her father's study on Monday about noon and told him she was not going to marry Lawry, he felt almost unable to face the fresh crop of worries which he saw arising.

"Are you sure this time?" he said gravely. "No one wishes to persuade you, but you gave me to understand that you wished to marry this man."

"I thought I did," said Peggy dolefully.

Mr. Hewitt sighed.

"I see now what I ought to have seen before. You were marrying him to pay off my debts."

"No, Father," said Peggy, regaining a little spirit. "I am not such a heroine of melodrama as to do that. I was going to marry him because I thought it would be the happiest thing for everybody. If it had been only that debt, I could have borrowed the money from Mr. Torwood."

"Well!" Mr. Hewitt sighed again. "What has made you change your mind?"

Peggy looked down. She felt sure Mrs. Hewitt had not told the Rector of that skilful intervention on the

day after the Pendleton Dancing and she could not betray her mother.

"I thought Charley never cared for me! Then I found out he once had," she said at last.

"But it was a boy and girl affair? It is all over now," said Mr. Hewitt.

"Yes. Oh, yes, it is all over now."

"Poor Charley!" said the Rector. "I should have liked him for a son, but of course he can't marry while Miss Tremaine lives."

"No," said Peggy. Then she burst forth impetuously: "Something ought to be done in the world. There ought not to be men like Charley going unmarried and heaps of weedy idlers having wives and children just——"

"Hush! Hush, Peggy," said Mr. Hewitt. "You are entering on a bigger question than you know."

"If a girl——" began Peggy heatedly, then she noticed her father's exhausted look and looked off. "I had to tell you before Mr. Lawry came. He will be here to-morrow at eleven."

"Would you like me to see him for you?"

Peggy hesitated.

"No," she said finally. "That would not be fair. I must see him myself."

"I'm sorry, Peggy," said the Rector. "I was glad to think you would be spared all the worries and struggles we have known."

"You have never regretted marrying as you did, Father," retorted Peggy.

"Ah, no," said the Rector simply, "but you see your mother and I have been so happy together."

If the Squire of Little Pendleton had worn a dress suit and carried a bouquet, he could not more obviously have been going to pay his addresses to the Rector's daughter. If he had been a Sultan before the chosen

houri, he could not have been more grandly about to drop the handkerchief. If he had been dragging the fair one out by the locks preparatory to smashing her on the head with a stone, he could not have been more visibly the triumphing, conquering male.

From every house some admiring eye looked after him. This was how the rescuer of distressed maidens should appear. He was, all at once, at the toppling summit of popularity.

"What a leg!" said the landlady.

"And a figure!" responded the landlord. "Though, myself, I admire more bony men."

"How noble he looks with his Homburg hat a bit to one side," sighed the postmistress, gazing through her window.

"What a beautiful, fresh colour he carries," said Young Mrs. Taylor. "Any one may tell he has a good meat meal three times a day."

And Stocks concluded with the handsome tribute:

"A South Sea Islander could tell he had a balance at the bank!"

Thus Little Pendleton, poor and toiling, watched the immemorial Cinderella play which still has power to wake the spirit of romance in almost every human heart. The readiness of the work-worn onlooker to clap when the golden coach comes up, and Cinderella and the Prince ride away to a splendour they will not even see, is very beautiful and touching.

So Mary, with hands chafed from wintry weather, and the prospect of poverty all her life, yet shone with joy as she ushered Lawry into the drawing-room. It was such glorious fun for Little Pendleton.

It was also pleasing for the Squire. He felt, and rightly, that he was doing a fine and generous thing. Some men—many men—would have been put off by the bailiff episode of the preceding week. It is not an ad-

vantage to marry into a family which you first have to free from pressing and rather disgraceful monetary difficulties. Not even King Cophetua would care to have been obliged to take his bride's father's dog and string out of pawn before leading the damsel up the steps of his throne.

But he had been nobler than King Cophetua. He had been nobler than any other lover, living or dead, would have been, and he swelled with the knowledge of it as he waited for Peggy.

At last he heard her footsteps outside. She came slowly, but that was only natural. No doubt she felt overwhelmed with shame for her father and gratitude towards him. He did not desire her to feel otherwise, because he thought it was a useful attitude for a wife to possess. But he was a good-natured man and he did not wish her to be unhappy: so he stepped forward and said softly through the door:

"Don't be afraid, Peggy. There is nothing to be afraid of, my dear."

"Oh!" began Peggy, coming forward and closing the door behind her. "What am I to say to you?"

"Nothing," replied Lawry. "What I did, I was glad to do. We will say no more about it. My dear little girl——"

"Don't!" said Peggy, pushing him away. "Oh! you may call me what you like. You may say what you like. I deserve it all. But I can't—really can't——"

"Can't what?" said Lawry, going very red.

"M-marry you," said Peggy.

"Have I asked you?" said Lawry with excusable temper.

"N-not this time," said Peggy, white and greatly distressed. "I know it looks as if I had taken all I could get and then——" She broke off, then continued in-

coherently: "I don't love you—I like some one else—I feel I could die sooner——"

"And do you think," said Lawry, controlling himself to speak slowly, though the veins in his temples stood out like whipcords, "do you think I should want to ask you after what happened when I was here last? Do you suppose anything but generous pity and a sense of having compromised you by my attentions would have made me come here to-day? Do you think I want a penniless, defaulting parson for a father-in-law?"

"Oh, hush!" said Peggy, white to the lips. "You are talking like that because you are so angry, and you have a right to be angry. But you are a kind man and a good one. You are not like that!"

He breathed hard for a moment, then his face grew less congested.

"Who's the other man? I have a right to be told that."

"Charley Tremaine. But he doesn't know."

"Doesn't *know!*" gasped Lawry.

"No. It's all on my side now."

"Then—you're giving *me* up for nothing?" said Lawry.

"Yes," said Peggy.

"And you're ready to go on living here from hand to mouth, just the same, when you might be my wife?"

"Yes," said Peggy again. "Oh, I know how generous you are to want me. And how badly I've behaved. But I simply can't!"

"Why didn't you find that out before?" said Lawry, struggling after self-control. "What made you turn against me?"

Peggy looked at him, earnestly and penitently; she owed him a truthful answer if there was one to be found in her soul.

"It was when I saw Charley going to feed the pigs," she said at last, remembering Tremaine's tall figure in

the early morning against the cow-stable wall, and the sudden conviction which then came upon her.

Lawry went purple again. Was she adding insult to injury by making game of him? Then he saw gradually that she was quite sincere and took up his hat. There was no object in wasting further time on a girl like that.

"My father would like a word with you before you go," said Peggy.

"Oh, I don't want any thanks for settling that little matter," said Lawry brusquely. "You can tell your father the incident is closed." For the Squire was too shrewd a man not to be able to cut his losses when dignity and common sense dictated such a course.

"You mean," said Peggy, "that even after my—my feeling I can't, you are still going to give all that money to help us out of our troubles?"

"Yes," said Lawry, seeing now how noble as well as sensible he had been and striking rather an attitude with his hat and leg. "Yes!"

"Oh!" sobbed Peggy, tears streaming down her cheeks, "I think you must be the best and noblest man that ever lived!"

And as she looked at him with rapturous eyes all shining through her tears, he began to think so, too. But he only said:

"No, no. Any man would have done the same."

"Not one in a million!" cried Peggy. "And as long as I live I shall be proud that you ever wanted me. But Father has had a small legacy and he will want to pay you back, of course. Just the money, I mean. The rest we never can pay back."

"Well, if he would really feel happier——" said Lawry, who had naturally no desire to throw away a nice little sum of money. "But he must take his own time, you know."

Then the Rector was fetched and spoke in moved tones of his great gratitude, and gave Lawry an I.O.U. for the amount advanced, and when the Squire went away at last down the village street he began to think there was more in giving than he had hitherto imagined. He thought of millionaires who gave huge sums to this and that and began to feel himself of their company. After all, there was a great pleasure in helping the deserving poor. He would do it again.

And this train of thought blunted the first keen edge of his disappointment, but it could not give him the air of a triumphant lover; so Little Pendleton knew that Cinderella's golden coach had got a wheel off and that the Prince was walking back by himself in a depressed frame of mind.

Eager faces watching out for him through little, ivy-curtained windows grew disappointed, as he passed, like those of children at a play when things go wrong; and when he glumly turned the corner near Miss Batten's that palpitating lady could no longer bear the suspense and ran across the road without thinking how she was to word her anxiety.

"Well, Miss Batten?" said the Squire shortly, for he, too, remembered the incident of the wicker dress stand and it brought this fresh failure home to him with unpleasant force.

"Is—have—I hope Miss Peggy is quite well?" gasped Miss Batten desperately, unable to find any other words in the whole universe, yet knowing they were the worst she could have chosen.

Lawry glared at her, crimson with sudden rage.

"What the devil is that to you?" he said, striding on; while Miss Batten stumbled back into her own front room and sat for some minutes staring at the picture of a tall young lady in a fashion plate whose backbone had evidently been destroyed by some sudden shock. It

seemed to soothe her a little. It was so exactly how she felt herself.

Then she began to cry, a thing she had not done for at least two years. She was so bitterly, bitterly disappointed that Peggy's golden coach had not turned up.

So the dark, winter days went by until the rosy shine of Christmas coming seemed to brighten them a little, and Peggy, buying her little gifts at Melbury Market, saw a sight which made her at last realise what she had done with her life.

She was crossing the Market Square to the fancy window of the draper's shop, when she suddenly noticed Tremaine on the same side, talking to a group of young people whom they both knew. The gay voices and laughter reached her quite distinctly, as she stood alone by the shop window.

"We'll fetch you at eight, then?"

"Oh, no trouble, Mr. Tremaine; all on our way!"

"Mind I'm in time for our first dance, then. That's all I care about," responded Tremaine gaily.

So he ran up the steps of the bank, and Peggy was left to face the fact that he could enjoy life without her.

She herself had been talking just as cheerily to those same young people earlier in the afternoon, and there were many things which she took pleasure in despite the constant little ache of her desire for her lover. But she forgot that when she went in with such a leaden heart to buy a rag doll for Young Mrs. Taylor's baby.

She saw, instead, the long years during which she herself would grow gradually old with her old parents: she did not realise how women's eyes are mercifully blindfolded so that they are led through that long time of growing old thinking it is still youth a little more lined, a little more interesting, a little more mature, until

they wake up one day to find that they are really old and that it does not matter.

Peggy looked at the tired, faded elderly girl who sold the rag doll and instinctively began to fight against feeling miserable.

After all, she had the dear old rectory, and so many lovely things in the world: Young Mrs. Taylor's baby would be so pleased with the rag doll; and the shop was full of rosy, jolly country people buying things to make other people feel jolly; and it was a hoar frost with bright sunshine—a day like a Christmas card from a Clerk of the Weather who had dined well.

Peggy smiled when she got to this, for she had a private, ridiculous habit of being chucklingly amused at her own small jokes; and at this unfortunate minute an old friend passed, who having heard of some of the Hewitts' troubles, had intended to send Peggy a cheque for a Christmas present. She decided now to send it to an Orphanage instead.

That is the worst—or best—of being obliged to fight depression until you see some jolliness somewhere; you never get any pity.

So the Pendleton people, who were disappointed by the outcome of Peggy's love affairs, would have felt more kindly towards her had she languished a little instead of going up and down the street in her old brown coat and skirt like a leaf before a merry wind.

Miss Batten begged, almost on bended knees, to be allowed to disclose the fact that Lawry had indeed proposed to marry Peggy.

"What's the use," she asked indignantly, "for me to *say* you never pined for the Squire, and could have him if you wanted him, when you go about getting thinner and thinner and he goes about looking like a harvest moon in trousers with Miss Ethel Torwood?"

Peggy laughed.

"They do seem to be rather friendly now," was all she said.

"Friendly!" snorted Miss Batten. "When I see him straddling down the street beside her, and her getting as fat as a hen in harvest time, and her sable scarf flying, I grind my teeth, Miss Peggy, I do indeed, until I sometimes think I shall spoil the set."

It was indeed a fact that Ethel Torwood grew daily more like her father and had already developed a "presence." She used an eye-glass, too, which irritated Mary to the point of frenzy, and after one of her visits this usually amiable handmaid burst into Peggy's room declaring that somebody else might attend the door on such occasions, for she declined to have her apron looked at as if it were something that crawled and wanted catching, when it only had one stain of tea on it.

The real reason, however, which lay at the bottom of this outburst remained unspoken, at any rate in Peggy's hearing; but Mary confided to Stocks over many cups of strong, sweet tea.

"Snake in the grass!" she said, referring to Miss Torwood. "Comes here and pretends to be friends and sneaks Miss Peggy's rich sweetheart behind her back."

"Well!" sighed Stocks, "it's Miss Peggy's own fault. If ever a young girl had a helping hand give her, it was our Miss Peggy. But there's some folks you can't help."

"What do they say at the Blue Lion?" inquired Mary tentatively.

"They say she's overstood her market."

"Aye," said Mary. "Lots does," she sighed. "That's what I thought when I took Bill."

"And thankful you ought to be," said Stocks sternly. "You lasses begin by wanting a chap that's like all the taking lads you ever knew rolled into one; and you may

end by wishing to goodness you'd taken your first chance with a squint and bow legs."

"But some folks would rather stop as they are than marry the wrong man," suggested Mary. "Perhaps Miss Peggy's like that!"

"Some folks are fools," said Stocks, "but you and me has something better to do than talk about them."

Then he scraped the last atom of sugar from the bottom of the cup and set it down and went to the door.

"Stocks!" whispered Mary, following him. "I hear Mr. Charley has found another young woman, too. One over Melbury way."

"Let him!" said Stocks. "I don't care. I've done with Miss Peggy."

"Now! Now!" said kind Mary soothingly. "You're put out because she hasn't gotten Mr. Lawry. So are we all!"

"I don't care, I tell you," growled Stocks; but only because he was more concerned than any one that the wheel should have come off Cinderella's coach. He had so often seen himself behind, favour in button-hole, staff in hand, the distributor of largesse to Little Pendleton.

CHAPTER XXX

A SKATING PARTY

RECTOR'S altered a bit," was the verdict of Little Pendleton, the first time Mr. Hewitt went down the village street after his illness.

And this change of body indicated an even greater change of mental attitude, which showed itself plainly enough in the following conversation.

"I was wondering," hesitated Peggy, "if you would very much mind if I went with Miss Batten to a service in the Primitive Methodist Chapel? They are getting up a Christmas offering for one of their clergy in Melbury who has been in difficulties because of his wife's illness. And Miss Batten wants me to go; not to give, I am sure, but to see how the Primitives can do it when they try. She has been very kind to me, Father."

And the Rector's daughter awaited a dignified remonstrance, for Mr. Hewitt's many excellencies had not hitherto included a love for his non-conformist brethren. But he only said, looking out across his own pleasant garden:

"They move every three years. It must be very hard to go through what I have done in a little furnished house amongst strangers, Peggy."

"You would be glad for me to go?" said Peggy eagerly.

"Yes, I think I shall be glad," said the Rector, unable all at once to conquer the prejudice of many years against the red tabernacle near the grocer's shop. Then he took out his shabby leather purse and gave her the sovereign with which he had meant to buy himself a new book or

two. He had not bought any books for such a long time.

"Change that into silver, my dear," he said, "and slip it into the bag so that it will not be noticed." He looked out again. "We ought to be very thankful for a garden, Peggy. Troubles are easier to bear when you have a garden!"

So, to the amaze of Little Pendleton, Peggy attended the Primitive Methodist Chapel, and at first she was chiefly concerned with the difference between the service to which she was accustomed and the one in which she now took part. But, little by little, her mind ceased to criticise and her feelings were awakened. The sincere conviction of an old man's "A-a-men" when the minister spoke of God's help in sorrow; the absolute faith with which two shabby toil-worn women sighed "Aye! Aye!" during a prayer which dwelt on the coming splendours of eternity. These were above the world, with all the saints and sages, having attained that which placed them above all gain or loss, the most stupendous power in the Universe—and yet to the outside world they were only Mrs. Bell from Hickory Lane, and Mrs. Massinger from the blacksmith's.

Peggy's eager soul was too fired by this discovery to take much account of the sermon, which aimed at being intellectual and was indeed very eloquent and forcible, and very like those she was accustomed to hear from certain clever young men who preached for her father.

"There!" said Miss Batten. "That's the sort of preacher we get nowadays. You don't want anything better than that, do you? I think it's about time one church gave up looking down on the other."

Peggy stood in the porch, her face vivid in the light from the lamp above her.

"Oh, Miss Batten," she said thinking not of the

preacher but of the old man and the tired women, "if people only knew, all the churches would be looking up to each other!"

"Well," said Miss Batten rather impatiently, "but what about this particular service?"

"Why, it just made me see how splendid the world is, to have so many kinds of goodness in it," answered Peggy.

"Um!" said Miss Batten, "I did expect you'd have been more impressed by the sermon."

Peggy laughed.

"I'm so used to sermons," she said, linking her arm in that of Miss Batten.

The congregation, however, would not have been more surprised to see her emerging on Miss Batten's arm from the den of lions: and as Peggy's neighbours plodded home through the winter night they felt a warm, jolly sense of being in the thick of things—there was always such a lot going on in Little Pendleton.

But others said the poor Rector must be failing or he would never have let Miss Peggy go to a Primitive Chapel in his own village, and Miss Tremaine was so greatly annoyed about it that her constant dwelling on the subject at every meal made Tremaine anxious to escape from the house as much as possible, and he was thankful for a frosty Saturday which enabled him to skate on the Wakefields' pond.

There had been some snow, and a great fire to boil kettles for tea roared at the upper end of the field, casting most lovely red lights across the white expanse, under a sunset sky that promised a long frost.

Tremaine was worried about his pigs, upon which he had spent all his small savings, and he wanted Peggy and could not have her, and Miss Tremaine's liver accentuated the faults of her neighbours this cold weather; but all the same his spirits rose as he walked briskly

across the field with his skates clinking over his arm. The time had come when he must have a little fun or knock his head against the pig-sty wall and have done with it: such times come to all young people who are virile enough to react against the pressure of care and anxiety.

So he hailed a group of old friends with a joyful shout, and was soon skating amongst them, laughing, joking, playing foolish tricks, after the manner of a boy let loose from school. The married Gladys Wakefield walked magnificent in furs with her husband by the side of the pond, like an angel returned in wings to the place of former habitation. She nodded to Ethel Torwood and refused to be abashed by that lady's deportment, and Mr. and Mrs. Wakefield were very solidly happy. The husband also appeared to be content, and looked like a good caricature of an English country gentleman, only sufficiently exaggerated to accentuate his sloping shoulders and his small, red nose. It was evident to all that marriage had smartened him up, and in this knowledge Gladys towed him proudly beside her and was satisfied. She became really happy, however, when she saw Peggy in an old brown suit, looking thin and girlish and unimportant.

"So pleased to see you, dear," she said. "But you look dreadfully run down. I must tell Father to send you some of his good cream."

"How good of you," said Peggy in all sincerity. "I am glad to see you looking so well, Gladys."

And the bride, who was feeling rather emotional just now and beginning to think that home and girlhood had been good after all, put out an impulsive hand and said, quite naturally:

"You look prettier than ever, being thin, but I shall make Father send that cream. It would not be like home if anything were to happen to Peggy of Little Pendleton."

Then they turned to look at Ethel Torwood, whose long acquaintance with winter sports abroad enabled her to move with great dignity and smoothness, as if propelled on wheels, so that the very idea of her falling down seemed almost sacrilegious. Lawry skated beside her and wore a little the air of Gladys Wakefield's husband, but with more pomp and assurance.

"I hear that's a case," said Gladys, then she remembered the gossip about Peggy and added hastily: "They're always matchmaking here, aren't they? Nothing in it, I dare say?"

"Oh, why not?" said Peggy. "I should be awfully pleased!"

But though she thought herself to be speaking the truth, and though forty-nine-fiftieths of her did so speak, a hidden but not inarticulate fiftieth was illogically annoyed by Lawry's obvious adoration.

It was this fiftieth, and the sight of Tremaine at the further end of the pond wheeling a pretty girl in a chair amid great laughter, which caused Peggy to welcome with ardour a lively little man who offered to fasten her skates.

He gaily reeled off all the old jokes which were invented by the first skating party after the glacial period and have served humanity ever since: and Peggy laughed as if she had never heard them before. So the little, lively man thought her even nicer than he had believed her to be and everybody was exceedingly merry.

After a while lights began to shine out from the splendid old farm-house beyond the park-like field, the moon rose over the church tower, rosy-faced girls from the farm kitchen brought fresh kettles to set on the fire, and new stacks of golden cakes and piles of home-made bread and butter. Mrs. Wakefield ordered and poured and smiled with a blue nose and a glow of intense sat-

isfaction inside. Mr. Wakefield called to the men to bring fresh wood for the fire, and the new moon rising over the white landscape rendered it still light enough for the expert skaters, though the clumsy ones began to fall about in grotesque attitudes, to be picked up again amid shouts of laughter.

Tremaine carried tea to the pretty girl in the chair from whom he seemed unable to detach himself for some time, and when at last he did so, Peggy was racing round with her cavalier and just laughed out a gay "Lovely, isn't it?" which gave him no encouragement to offer belated attentions. Finally she joined the group by the big fire, to overhear Tremaine saying: "Yes, this is the only sort of farming that pays in England at present. The little farmers have no chance." And then Lawry's heavier voice, saying, "They ought to co-operate," and the little, lively man's high-pitched: "Englishmen are slow to co-operate. It's the best in them that won't let them."

And then, above it all, Ethel Torwood's flutelike:

"Tea, please," and a response from Lawry, tender, intimate, unmistakable:

"Do you take sugar, Ethel?"

A thrill ran round the group, and Ethel looked very handsome standing there in the firelight with her fair hair roughened about her face.

"You should have waited, Miss Torwood," said Mr. Wakefield, stepping forward with a round table. "Here is some negus coming to warm you all up before going home. Put it down here, Mary."

"Negus!" shrieked Tremaine's pretty lady of the chair. "But how perfectly enchanting! I thought it went out with the crinoline."

"I wonder if I might——" began Mr. Wakefield; then he drew Lawry aside and continued in a low voice: "Squire of our Parish. Every one naturally interested.

Might I propose a toast?" and he wagged his head backwards towards Miss Torwood.

Lawry threw out his chest and answered:

"Oh, well! If you really wish—no need for secrecy, of course. I am sure we shall consider it a most propitious beginning."

So the new Squire and his future wife took their stand together while Mr. Wakefield ladled spicy, steaming negus into glasses from a great china bowl, and the smiling maids wrapped up in coloured shawls ran round distributing them to the guests.

"H—h'm!" said Mr. Wakefield, using the same voice with which he read the lessons in church. "As senior tenant I have our Squire's permission to be the first to wish him and his future bride all the—the—" inspiration suddenly dried up and he searched the faces of his audience in vain—"the compliments of the season. May they continue long in the land—" he gasped, cold sweat on his brow—"and reign over us happy and glorious with their children's children—doing well—too."

"Bravo!" shouted the short, lively man.

"Hear, hear! Wakefield!" said Tremaine.

"Oh, darling Ethel! How perfectly sweet," said the pretty lady.

Then Lawry stepped forward, drawing Ethel with him, and feeling that this was indeed the right thing.

"Mr. Wakefield," he said, "whatever happiness comes to us in the future, Miss Torwood and I will always look back to this moment as one of the pleasantest in our lives. Thank you very much indeed for your good wishes."

"Three cheers for the Squire!" cried Mr. Wakefield, and as they rang out through the frosty air, some one murmured from behind:

"Well, Wakefield's got the length of the new Squire's foot."

"And small blame to him," answered another, "with all them buildings wanting re-roofing."

So Lawry expanded and plumed himself among those simple villagers, who knew nothing about business or the great world, and he told them surprising things about the rotation of the crops and the ease with which any sensible man could make a fortune out of farming.

But while this was going on, Ethel left her lover and touched Peggy on the arm.

"Come!" she whispered, "I must speak to you for a minute," and the two girls slipped quietly away into the grey shadows beyond the radius of the firelight. "Peggy," she continued then, "do you think me a beast? I ought not to have taken him from you: and yet I——" She paused and continued impulsively: "That all seems to go when you are really fond of a man."

"You care for him like that!" said Peggy, with such surprise that Ethel was justified in feeling that it must be a case of sour grapes.

"Well, *you* didn't seem to object to him in the past," she could not help remarking; for it was one thing to accuse herself of stealing a treasure and quite another to be told that she was pleased with a gift which nobody else wanted.

"He is everything that is good and generous," said Peggy.

"But you wonder at my falling in love with him?" said Ethel.

"Oh, Ethel!" cried Peggy, suddenly kissing her friend in the shadows. "I don't wonder at anybody loving anybody—and so long as you do—I'm so very, very glad you do."

Thus was that fiftieth part of Peggy, which objected to a man who had loved her finding a new love within six weeks, effectually silenced.

Then Lawry approached and stood with an appropriate

hand through Ethel's arm while listening to Peggy's congratulations, and he already wondered how he could ever have wanted the Rector's daughter with some one so much more suitable on the other side of his park fence. Ethel, even now, rounded out and completed his sense of importance; this, undoubtedly, was the wife for whom he had been waiting since those days when he so ruthlessly crushed his youthful passion for the lady at present fatly sentimental in the suburbs.

He even felt sorry for Peggy that she had missed such a chance, and noticed her going across the snow on foot instead of in his comfortable car with some natural complacence.

Tremaine also stood looking after her. The moon had risen now, and he remembered so vividly their summer hour in the Inn garden, that across the sweet, keen air he could even smell a fragrance of roses.

He had kept away from her all the afternoon, but he could not see her going home alone in the moonlight and not follow her.

"Peggy!" he called, catching her up with long, easy strides.

"Why, Charley!" she said, as if she had not known his footstep.

But there was a constraint between them, and they could not talk in the old, friendly, easy way together; too much lay between. They spoke artificially of Ethel Torwood's engagement, and the little lively man's jokes, and at the Rectory gate they parted with a feeling of restless dissatisfaction, almost irritation.

Little Pendleton in the snow and the moonlight looked like a village in an exile's dream of home, and yet the people in it were not pleased with life that night. Cinderella's coach had stopped at the wrong door, and an ordinary princess with chariots of her own had stepped inside, and they were disappointed of their fairy tale.

"Miss Peggy could have had him if she liked," maintained Stocks, but dejectedly, not in the way necessary to carry conviction. And no power on earth could prevent the Rector's wife from insinuating the same thing. In fact, in deepest confidence, she stated plainly that Lawry had proposed for her daughter; but nobody believed her, though they indulgently gave her the credit for imagining she spoke the truth because Mrs. Hewitt always met with indulgence.

"Dear Peggy," she was wont to wind up, "too much heart! She is all heart!"

And it remains one of the small mercies of Peggy's life that she never overheard this remark.

But one Saturday afternoon she encountered Jack walking along the lane with a purposeful stride, a very solemn look, and a horsewhip grasped in his small, grubby hand. He nodded only in response to her greeting.

"Why, what's up, Jack?" she said, standing in front of him.

"Nothing," he scowled.

"You look as if you were going to thrash somebody with that whip," she jested.

"I am," he answered, tightening his mouth and bulging out his round cheeks.

Peggy laughed.

"Don't look so like a pirate in a story book, old man!"

Jack scowled more fiercely than ever.

"It's all very well for you to stand giggling there," he said. "If you only knew——" Then he stopped short.

"Do tell me what you're going to do, Jack," pleaded Peggy, beginning to be a little uneasy.

"You'd stop me," said Jack, shaking his head.

"I won't if it's nothing bad."

"Truth and honour?"

"Truth and honour!"

"Well," said Jack, "I'm going to horsewhip Mr. Lawry."

"What!" screamed Peggy, as well she might.

"Bobby Parker's brother says if any man behaved to his sister like Lawry's behaved to you, he should horsewhip him. And Bobby told me *he* should if he was me, but he said I daren't. But I dare. I dare do anything."

He stood in the middle of the winter lane, the oddest little figure, blowing out his cheeks and boasting and brandishing his whip. But to Peggy he seemed very dear and splendid.

"My darling, darling old Jackums," she said, "there isn't any need. Can you keep a secret? A proper, grown-up secret?"

"One of the sort you have with Ethel Torwood?"

"Ethel does not know this."

He spit on his hand and crossed it.

"May I die if I tell!"

"Oh!" groaned Peggy. "What ways! Well, the secret is this, Jack! Mr. Lawry did ask me to marry him and I said 'No'!"

Jack let his whip fall loose as he stared at her.

"What on earth did you do that for?"

Peggy, looking down at the round, disgusted face, found it difficult to explain.

"I—I didn't love him enough, Jack."

"And I mayn't tell a living soul?"

"No. I trust you."

He turned round and began to trudge towards home.

"Marrying's all rot," he said, "the way you do it. When I'm a man I shall just go up to the girl I like and say: 'Shall you ever want to get married to me?' Right at the very beginning, I shall. Then I shall know where I am. I shan't call and call and give presents and then find out she wants somebody else."

Peggy laughed again.

"Look here," he remarked, standing still. "I do wish you would laugh when I make a real joke, which you always don't, and not laugh when there's nothing funny."

"But you often make lovely jokes when you don't notice, Jackums," soothed his sister.

"Do I?" said Jack. Then he had a brilliant idea. "I say, Pegs, perhaps I'm going to write *Punch* when I grow up or those funny bits in the *Melbury Herald*. Father said the other day he didn't know what he should make of me, I'm so bad at sums. And you don't want sums to write *Punch*, of course."

"Of course not," agreed Peggy.

Then, his masculine spirit soothed by subservience, he condescended to place a grubby paw in Peggy's as they went through the Rectory garden.

"I'm rather glad to have made up my mind for certain what I'm going to be," he continued. "I did think a lawyer, but I believe they have to always be making people pay money that they don't want. And the real, proper sweetshops are all in towns, and I shouldn't care to live in a town, so that was no good either. I'm awfully glad I thought about *Punch*."

CHAPTER XXXI

GIRLS IN APRIL

MR. AND MRS. HEWITT sat alone together over the fire on a March evening, Peggy having gone to bed with a headache. There was a long silence which might have lasted longer without their knowing it, so used were they to the quiet passing of the time in Little Pendleton. At last the Rector glanced up, frowning rather anxiously, from his meditations.

"Peggy looks thin," he said. "I hope she does not regret her refusal of Lawry."

"Oh, no," said Mrs. Hewitt, turning a page of her book, "I'm sure it is not that."

And there was silence again.

"You don't think she could be hankering after Charley Tremaine?" asked the Rector suddenly.

Mrs. Hewitt let her book drop.

"Why! I hope not. I don't think so."

"I'm rather afraid it may be that," said the Rector. "I've noticed trifles—nothing to lay hold on—still, I have gained a sort of impression that she might care for him. I regarded it as a danger, much as I like Charles, for of course he is not in a position to marry, and will not be, so far as one can see." He sighed impatiently. "But I must confess I do not like to think of Peggy being played fast and loose with, even from the highest motives."

At this, something in the mother-spirit of Mrs. Hewitt rose from long sleep and compelled her to defend her daughter even against the girl's father.

"Peggy has not been played fast and loose with. She could have had Charles months ago. He came to ask her and I put him off. I told him it was hopeless, and he saw it was, himself. It is hopeless, however you look at it."

"Why did you not tell me this before, Agnes?" said the Rector.

"I didn't want to trouble you."

He rose abruptly and walked up and down.

"I ought not to have lived so that you all must try to spare me," he said at last. "I have a deal to regret, Agnes."

"We all have," said Mrs. Hewitt, quite recovered from her outburst and folding her work. "I must go and see if Mary is bringing my Benger's Food. I expect Peggy made it before going to bed."

The Rector came and stood in front of her.

"Agnes," he said, "I'm going to tell Peggy what you have told me."

"She knows," said Mrs. Hewitt.

"She knows!" said the Rector.

Then Mary came in with the Benger's Food and Mr. Hewitt said: "I do hope it will be a fine day for the confirmation to-morrow. It is so awkward—the girls having to go in an open waggonette to Great Pendleton—and if it rains——"

Thus, gently conversing and warding off a disagreeable topic, Mrs. Hewitt ate her Benger's Food and went upstairs to bed and to sleep; for she was of that favoured company who always feel in the end that they have acted for the best and consider the result to be, in the words of Miss Batten, the Lord's lookout.

But Mr. Hewitt was not so constituted and he lay awake most of the night, as elderly people do, who once begin to puzzle over a problem after twelve o'clock. At dawn he got up and went into the dressing room. Mrs.

Hewitt vaguely presumed he was about to take an early service, opened an eye, closed it again, and slept.

The churchyard was very calm in the morning sunshine as the Rector passed through it, with little white and purple violets blooming behind the headstones, and he stood still for a moment, looking at the green graves and wondering what had mattered most in life to those who lay there.

The dew, the April flowers, the liquid voices of the birds, all combined to produce an effect of youth and light which gave the Rector, for the moment, a sensation of almost unbearable joy. It is not the great happinesses, but such unattached, unexpected moments which bring our keenest sensations of pure joy, as nearly unalloyed as we can bear now.

The Rector went on again. He knew quite well what had mattered most to those people in their lives. It was love. How much they had loved each other.

He began to walk more quickly, taking the short way across the field in spite of the wet grass, and very soon he saw Tremaine carrying a bucket.

"Good morning!" called the Rector, and, indeed, a morning had never seemed to him more good.

"Oh, is anything——" began Tremaine; then he saw that nothing was the matter; the serene shining of the Rector's look quite dispelled any such thought. "You're early out," he added.

"Yes," said the Rector. "I wanted to see you alone."

Tremaine put down his bucket and came forward.

"Last night," continued the Rector, "my wife told me for the first time that you came on the day after Lawry's dance to propose to Peggy."

"I didn't do it, though," said Tremaine quickly.

"No. My wife told me she dissuaded you." The Rector paused. "Charley, I have come to unsay what she told you that day."

"You mean—you are willing?" said Tremaine, greatly astonished.

"I think Peggy cares for you. I feel sure of it; and that this uncertainty is making her unhappy," said the Rector.

"But what was true then holds good now, sir," answered Tremaine sadly. "Mrs. Hewitt did not say one word more than she was justified in saying. I have no right to drag a young, attractive girl into an engagement which must mean years of delay, with nothing but poverty at the end. She might marry any one."

"She won't marry any one but you, Charley. I begin to see that," said Mr. Hewitt with a sigh. "There is no man living whom I would rather have for a son, but I cannot deny the fact that I am sorry for her to be poor and struggling as we have always been. I wanted her to have everything. You will find out, some day, that we want our children to have all the joys we have had, but more particularly all we have missed."

"I can give her so little," said Tremaine, "but what I can give is waiting for her all the time. You know that."

"Well," said the Rector, "you must think it over."

"Think!" said Tremaine. Then he calmed himself. "I have thought."

And the older man, looking at the lines and the faint hollows in cheek and temple, knew a little of how he had thought. And yet the Rector had so far forgotten youth that he could scarcely understand a battle with self for love fierce enough to alter a man's face.

"I am sure Peggy is not happy," was all he could say.

"She is not pining for me, sir, if that is what you mean," said Tremaine rather bitterly. "I have had plenty of opportunities for seeing that."

"Well," said the Rector, "I don't know. I can't answer for her, of course. But I want you to ask her."

The two men looked at each other. There was a certain amount of hurt pride and obstinacy in Tremaine's expression.

"She hasn't seemed at all anxious that I should do so," he said. "There's always some chap or other——"

The Rector smiled.

"My dear fellow," he said, "is Peggy the sort of girl to weep in a corner? She has too much spirit, just as you have. But people with spirit are always so tiresome to help in affliction. They take a sort of perverse pleasure, after a while, in being brave. I shall soon begin to think you don't want to take off your hair shirt, Charley."

"I don't want to spoil Peggy's life. Mrs. Hewitt said her life would be spoiled if we became engaged," maintained Tremaine.

"She is—you know what Peggy is to me," said the Rector simply, "and I ask you to give her the chance."

Then, at last, Tremaine's defences all broke down.

"It's been—you don't know—when I thought she was going to marry Lawry——" He drew a long breath. "It was hell!"

"Purgatory," said the Rector gently. "You've gained something!"

They walked a few steps together.

"Then you'll be coming in?" said the Rector.

"Thank you, sir," said Tremaine, quietly enough.

"Lambs look well," said the Rector, glancing across the field.

"There's not," stammered Tremaine with a great effort, "there's not a man in ten thousand who would have come to me like this. I can't——"

"Don't!" said the Rector. "Let us leave it all without any more words. I shall never ask either you or Peggy what has been said between you."

Then he went back across the field and the church-

yard, but things did not look so clear and simple as they had done in that first freshness of rising and coming out into this dewy, flowery world. He began to wonder if he had acted rightly, and if the two young people really did care enough for each other to make a long engagement worth while.

Mrs. Hewitt, too, was awake when he went up to put on dry socks, and called rather querulously through the dressing room door: "It's not early service, I hear. Where have you been?"

He came reluctantly forward, determined, however, to have no more concealments.

"I have been to see Charley Tremaine. I have told him we—we have no objection to an engagement."

"Oh, James!" cried Mrs. Hewitt, "I always knew you were wanting in common sense. But I never thought you would have done a thing like that! Send Peggy to me. Where is Peggy?"

"Agnes, you are to leave matters alone this time," said Mr. Hewitt, and, though he stood there in his grey stocking feet with a wet shoe in his hand, his wife trembled before him. He had only once or twice so spoken to her in all her married life. She began to weep a little.

"I did it for the best, James," she said. "No one can deny I have made the most I could of our small opportunities. And I often suffer without saying a word rather than depress you all. Only we have been so poor. I did not want Peggy to be as poor as we have been all these years."

He let the shoe fall and went across to the bed.

"My poor girl," he said, taking his wife's hand, "I understand that. I feel the same. But Peggy must have her chance. It is not right to interfere in the destiny of two people who love each other without the very gravest reason."

"I don't see that you can want a graver reason than one general servant and bread pudding three times a week," sobbed poor Mrs. Hewitt. "And to think Ethel Torwood is marrying that man next Thursday, with a new car and a sable coat for a wedding present because she has her mother's diamonds and doesn't want any more. Life does seem hard; and things are unevenly divided, say what you will!"

But all the same she understood that she must not interfere.

Tremaine walked up the Rectory drive and rang at the front door bell, feeling quite unlike a successful lover. The difficult repression of his emotions during that long winter had produced at last a state of mind from which he could not immediately be aroused. The waiting was over, but he had gone so long without love that he could not ardently desire love now it was placed before him. And he was ashamed and angry to feel like this, but he could not make himself feel otherwise.

"Yes," said Mary. "Mrs. Hewitt is at home."

"And—Miss Peggy?" he forced himself to say.

Mary beamed out at him, suddenly interrogative: was Miss Peggy going to have a young man after all? But his blank face told her nothing.

"Miss Peggy's in the garden," she said. "Will you go there?"

"Oh, I'll see Mrs. Hewitt."

Mary glanced at him out of her eye corners and jerked out shortly:

"Come this way, then—sir."

But she could not despise him more than he despised himself for this dull apathy, which is a thing that no woman can understand in a man in love.

"Oh, Charley!" said Mrs. Hewitt with emotion, holding out both hands from her sofa. Instinctively, she

determined that if he were to be a son-in-law he should be an adoring one, anything else would be so terribly out of the picture. "So you've come here too, Charley. I am glad. This is where my own children always come for help and comfort."

She believed this so absolutely that, for the moment, Tremaine almost believed it as well, and in any case he thought Mrs. Hewitt a very sweet woman. All men of vigorous temperament naturally admire a woman who flops in a corner and seems to place eternity at their disposal, and it is only by accident that they are attracted to the quick, energetic sort.

"You are very kind to me," said Tremaine, trying to force himself through the cloud of dulness, almost tangible, which seemed to envelop and surround him.

"Peggy is in the garden," said Mrs. Hewitt, mindful of her instructions not to interfere. "She is just taking the girls who are to be confirmed across to the church. It is a still day. They will be able to drive in their caps and veils the short distance to Great Pendleton. Mrs. Wakefield is taking them and there is not room for Peggy in the waggonette. They are having a little service first. Peggy will walk over."

"Oh, yes," said Tremaine, scarcely hearing the babble of his hostess. He was tortured by the knowledge that nothing now kept him from Peggy, and yet he had no desire whatever to go to her. Sweat rose to his forehead. It was terrible.

"There's the bell!" he said, rising abruptly and going to the other window, which stood wide open.

As he stood there, the bell rang "Clang! Clang!" over the sunny garden, and he saw Peggy in a faded blue gown amongst a group of village girls whose white veils fell about their round, rosy faces. They walked on a green lawn covered with daisies, slowly, for fear of disarranging the veils, and the clouds of Tremaine's dulness

parted, letting his heart see through the rift; it was as if he saw paradise where he had thought there was nothing but a long, dull road.

In a moment all his desire and love for Peggy awakened once more, but it was something more exquisite and sacred than he had ever known before or imagined he could know. His ardour, after that long purification, burned with the white flame which is fanned only by the hidden sighs of men who have given up self for love. It is fiercer and clearer than any red flame of unconsidered passion. It is the supreme manifestation of the unity of soul and body.

Tremaine watched Peggy go among her girls through the gate into the churchyard, and then the bell ceased. He walked after them to the church door, where some primroses were growing, and listened to the fresh voices of the girls inside:

> "The King of Love my Shepherd is
> His goodness faileth never."

The clear sound followed him as he went back to the garden. Then there was a murmur of prayer; and when they came out, he saw them framed by the green of the garden hedge, their faces a little pale, and their eyes bright with the unshed tears which they were ready to weep because life spread out before them, so mysteriously glorious, upon that April day.

The Rector handed them into the waggonette with a fine, unconscious air of honouring them because they were now going to be women. Even Mrs. Wakefield's voice sounded deep and subdued, the voice of a mother of men. There was a turning on wheels of gravel and Peggy returned alone through the churchyard gate.

Tremaine went up to her and took her hand. He seemed lifted above the little jocularities and subterfuges of ordinary courtship.

"Peggy, will you marry me?" he said.

"Yes," said Peggy.

They could not have questioned and answered more simply if they had been before the altar a hundred yards away; and the words could not even there have seemed to them any more binding or eternal.

They walked on until they reached the summer house, and then Tremaine pulled Peggy down on the seat beside him and held her fast in his arms without speaking.

When he released her they were both trembling with the magnitude of the joy which had opened out before them during that embrace.

"Oh, Pegs," he said, "the winter—the long winter——"

"It's over now. We shall have the summer together."

Then, faintly, came the distant sound of Great Pendleton bells, ringing in honour of the Bishop.

"We must go. Father will wonder," said Peggy.

"I think not," said Tremaine, smiling.

"He knows? He's glad?"

"Yes, dear."

"Oh!" cried Peggy. "That's just the last, glorious thing. I never knew that engaged people were so happy. What a lovely, lovely world it is, with thousands and thousands of people feeling like this every day!"

Tremaine put a hand on either side of her happy, vivid face, turning it up to him.

"Will you kiss me?" he whispered, looking into her eyes.

"Why—I have——"

"But of your own accord."

He bent nearer; for a moment she hesitated, then she kissed him. And as he felt the touch of her fresh young lips on his he did indeed feel it to be a sort of sacrament.

"Come what may," he said, "you're mine and I'm yours."

Then Great Pendleton bells ceased, and in the silence which followed they knew that the girls were kneeling now in the church. Mr. Hewitt would be standing in the chancel, his delicate face like a cameo against the masses of white flowers.

"If we hurried, we could slip in just before the end," said Peggy.

"You mean you'd like your father to look up and see us there?" said Tremaine. "All right."

"Charley, if you're going to be the kind of husband who understands everything like that, without being told —well, I—I——" and she broke off, hiding her face on his shoulder.

"What, darling?"

But Peggy jumped up, laughing, though with tears in her eyes. "I think I shall sometimes find it very inconvenient."

So he laughed, too, and they raced along the sunny lanes between banks of primroses and violets. But just as they were about to enter the church, Peggy stopped still and said, aghast:

"There's Mother!"

"Never mind; she'll hear soon enough," said Tremaine, feeling that nothing mattered.

"Well," agreed Peggy, "it's not as if I were going to be married to-morrow. I shall be at home for years, of course."

But that thought quite failed to depress her, for she saw those coming years as a brilliant chain of hours just like this: they all shone with the clear sunshine of an April day and were glorified by the tender radiance of a first acknowledged love.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE BLUE LION RAMPANT

ETHEL TORWOOD was married a week later, and Peggy walked behind the bride, wearing a pink gown and the best pendant obtainable for a moderate price, in common with five other young ladies of the neighbourhood. An experienced boy and girl of about six plodded solemnly up the aisle, holding the bride's train with an air of realising fully that this little affair was all in the day's march. The children of Little Pendleton gazed open-mouthed at such aplomb, and saw themselves in dreams, for months afterwards, wearing white satin slashed with blue and walking up the church to slow music.

In the meantime, they threw primroses before the rather large feet of the bride, while after-festivities were held at the village schoolroom, on the Torwoods' estate, and, with moderation, on the estate of the bridegroom.

Stocks received an adequate fee from Lawry, but also a private tip from the bride, for the sake of old acquaintance, which was so handsome that it had the extraordinary effect of making him keep sober, even at a wedding. He did not argue to himself about the matter, but an inherent sense of fitness made him feel that a church official receiving a sum of that magnitude for his services could not appropriately get drunk on the same evening. Still, he felt bad-tempered, and was haughty in the taproom of the Blue Lion, and unjustly severe with Young Taylor, whose infant had again fulfilled its part in the scheme of things and had cried at

the back of the church during the ceremony. Stocks had no real objection to a baby crying at such a time, because he instinctively realised its inevitableness, but it ought to have been a younger and shriller baby, not a sturdy boy beginning to talk.

"Miss Torwood—Mrs. Lawry as is—looked main and well," said the man in the corner, who was always anxious to prevent strife.

"*I* should look fine, dressed out like that," said the objector. "On'y clothes! She's like my old woman underneath."

"Anyway, Miss Peggy looked well. But I wished she'd been walking first in the white satin gown," said Young Taylor innocently.

"She could ha' been," snapped Stocks.

"Well, I was glad she'd gotten a young man o' some sort, poor lass, before this wedding came off," said the man in the corner. "She would ha' looked deserted if she hadn't taken up with Mr. Charles. I dessay that's why she did."

Stocks privately thought the same, but all the more reason for him to retort:

"*Your* fancy led you where there was a lot o' money, but some people's runs on first to an empty cupboard, you know, me lad."

The blow struck home, for the fancy in question had not possessed many attractions and she was an old maid when the alliance took place; for there are still old maids in Little Pendleton.

"Miss Peggy wanted him! Everybody knows that; and we all did our best to help her," said the pacific man, losing his temper at last. "What about bridges? What about voluntines? What about—G-r-r——!"

He stopped short, struggling, for Stocks was as tinder to his spark, and had grasped his neck-handkerchief while shaking a knotted fist before his nose.

"Say that agen!" gasped Stocks.

"Come! Come! Your time o' life!" said Young Taylor, dragging his distinguished relative away by the coat-tails.

"What's all this about?" said the landlady of the Blue Lion, appearing at the door. "Stocks, I'm ashamed of you. You can't let a wedding pass without getting too much to drink."

But this gross injustice, added to the mental suffering of the unsuccessful matchmaker, proved too much for Stocks. He flung his half-full pewter pot across the room and banged through the door, calling out:

"I've done with the Blue Lion! I shake the dust off my feet. Pot-house!"

So the landlady, who was entertaining friends, returned to the bar and said to the company there assembled:

"I thought Stocks must be drunk, there was such a turmoil! But they all say he was quite sober. I don't know what's the matter with him."

"Narked about the wedding," remarked the postmistress. "No wonder."

"So are we all," sighed Miss Batten. "And when she could have had the Squire!"

The landlord shook his head; he had been obliged to pay out several good half crowns that day in settling the bets on Peggy.

"That's one of the other lies you women tell and don't count," he said. "Even the strictest of you don't. A female angel would feel it was all right to say she had a headache when she hadn't, or to make out an old sweetheart had asked her first, when he went off with somebody else. It's nature, and you can't go against nature."

"And a man angel—if there is such a thing—would stand straddling in front of the fireplace and talk about women as if he'd just got to know they could breathe,

and was a wonderful clever chap for finding it out," retorted Miss Batten, who was bursting to give details of the scene with the wicker dress-frame and whose temper suffered from the restraint.

"Well! Well! Proof of pudding's in the eating," said the Butcher Dunn, puffing. "As I always say, meat's meat and money's money. You can't make things no different than what they *are*."

Then refreshments were brought in, and every one felt cheerful in spite of their disappointment, because the lightest pastry and the richest pound cakes, all golden within and tender brown outside, and strawberry tarts unequalled in these islands were always forthcoming at the Blue Lion.

Miss Batten and the postmistress sipped a sparkling lemonade which is still called nectar in Little Pendleton, and the married ladies took a small glass of port for the good of their health, and at last it was time to go home as usual through the starry spring night.

Peggy and Tremaine heard voices and footsteps a long way off in the perfect stillness as they stood at the gate saying good night, but they did not know that their neighbours were going to bed with a blank feeling that fairy tales never come true, even when a whole village of fairy godmothers are on hand to assist.

"Look!" said Peggy. "Have you noticed how the lower windows darken and the lights come out through the trees? I've watched it so often."

"When you were sewing early and late? Poor little fingers——" So he kissed them, and, being still in that first beginning of love when the touch of a girl's finger means a tumult of joy and longing, he whispered in her ear: "Peggy, don't you wish we had been married to-day instead of the Lawrys?"

She clung to him for a moment, then said softly:

"I'm happy as I am."

"Don't you want to belong to me?" he said. "Just think—we should be in some place by the sea to-night—just you and I alone together."

The sharpness and urgency of his tone distressed her a little. She looked up at him very sweetly in the starlight.

"But you are happy now?" she said.

"Yes, yes, my own Peggy. My own little girl," he said, pressing her to him.

But neither of them knew how happy they were that spring night, in the early glamour of acknowledged love before use had robbed it of its first, exquisite, poignant freshness. Something might come after which was stronger and better and deeper, but not this, any more.

"There's Young Taylor's light going up," said Peggy, pointing through the trees.

"If only we'd a little home, dear!" said Tremaine.

But at last they parted. Young Mrs. Taylor heard the clang of the Rectory gate from her upper room with the leaded casement.

"That'll be Mr. Charles going," she remarked, pulling off her stockings. "Lor', my feet are that tired. Marriage isn't all they say."

"Would you be single again, then?" grunted Young Taylor, removing his collar.

"Oh, to-morrow!" retorted Young Mrs. Taylor, viewing her wedding ring, which began already to look a little worn and responsible. Then Baby chuckled in his cot and the young parents laughed softly together. It was as if Baby knew quite well that she was glad to pay by suffering and fear of death for her place among the company of married women.

"There was a rare to-do with Stocks to-night," said Young Taylor, extinguishing the light, and Tremaine, from the lane, saw it twinkle out, and sighed again.

"Poor old Stocks!" said Young Mrs. Taylor. "He

was that set on Miss Peggy being Squire's wife. But if she and Mr. Charles are fond of one another like you and me——"

"I wouldn't change you, lass, not for one with a million of money," said Young Taylor, and he meant it. But he thought as he went to sleep that a million was a nice thing—you could do a lot with a million.

Last of all, the lights went out at the village inn, and the Blue Lion on the sign showed very faintly in the starlight. He appeared to be shaking his fist at Fate.

CHAPTER XXXIII

A LONG ENGAGEMENT

MISS TREMAINE'S state call on the mother of the intended bride had been delayed by a rather opportune cold in the head. Now she and Miss Wilson chanced to come on a day when Peggy was from home, so the two ladies and Mrs. Hewitt sat round the tea-table, talking freely of matrimony from their various standpoints.

"Poor Peggy!" sighed Mrs. Hewitt, lifting her cup with elegant languor. "However, she seems very happy."

"Nothing so very wonderful in that, considering she is engaged to Charles," said Miss Tremaine, with a rising colour. "I don't know another like him."

"Of course. But I fear it will be a very long engagement. I always had rather a horror of long engagements," said Mrs. Hewitt.

"Oh, have you?" said Miss Wilson. "Now, I think they give the young couple such a charming opportunity for getting to know each other really well. Every one says an engagement is a happy time for a girl, so no doubt the more she has of it the better. Don't you think so, Mrs. Hewitt? Don't you think so, Miss Tremaine?"

"I have begged Charles to bring his wife home as soon as he likes," said Miss Tremaine, settling her glasses. "It is my house and my furniture, so I cannot offer to turn out and leave myself homeless, but they can have their own rooms."

"But how delightful!" said Miss Wilson. "Such nice company for Peggy in the day, when her husband is at business. Don't you think it is a delightful arrangement, Mrs. Hewitt?"

"I think young people are best alone," said Mrs. Hewitt, bestowing her attention upon the teapot.

"They would want to be alone at times, of course," babbled Miss Wilson, glancing, rather troubled, from one clouded face to the other. "However, Time solves all these questions. I have the greatest possible belief in Time."

And soon after that the two unmarried ladies went away together across the garden, meeting Peggy as they walked through the churchyard.

"We've been to congratulate. Your mother seems so pleased. And Miss Tremaine has such a *delightful* plan," said Miss Wilson, kissing Peggy with real affection.

"I expect she knows it," said Miss Tremaine. "She and Charles are at the stage of having no secrets from one another. I hope they will be very happy." And she also kissed Peggy. "Oh, by the way, I was to give you a note—though what you find to write about——"

She took a letter from her bag, and as she did so a card also dropped face upwards upon the grass, whence Miss Wilson picked it up. Peggy turned scarlet and seized it from her.

"What——" began Miss Tremaine.

"Afterwards! Afterwards!" murmured Peggy.

"But what on earth——"

"If you'll *only* wait——" urged Peggy, with such desperate entreaty that Miss Tremaine put the card back in her bag and said no more.

"Quite a chance that I was able to come to-day," said Miss Wilson, all unconscious. "Not that I wouldn't have put off any engagement to call and congratulate you,

dear Peggy. But I am asked out every day this week. It is a lesson to me always to look inward when I am inclined to criticise my neighbours. I used to sit at home and feel very lonely with all the others gone and the old rooms just the same, you know, and then I made a little effort, and one after another all my neighbours rallied round me to a wonderful extent. Really wonderful, when you consider I have nothing to offer in return."

"I always find that those who don't offer much don't get much," said Miss Tremaine, in her usual short way, but she looked oddly at Peggy.

"Then I'll say good-bye, as I am dining out to-night. People see you at one place and that seems to remind them, and then they ask you too. It seemed to remind several people when they met me at Lady St. Malden's—the dowager, you know. I was there to meet the bride."

"Which bride? The air's full of 'em," said Miss Tremaine.

"Oh, Lord St. Malden's—but Mr. and Mrs. Lawry were there—all most orange-blossomy and so on. Ethel positively radiant in a pearl necklace and nothing else. So simple and bridal. Well, good-bye!"

Peggy and Miss Tremaine were left facing each other.

"This card," said the elder lady, producing it.

"Well?" said Peggy.

"I came to ask your father about it. That old fool Mrs. Jefferson with a chin like a badly set jelly has been calling on me three times a week lately and leaving a little fruit and a tract. She's very superstitious and believes in dreams, so I suppose she has been urged by a card like this to overcome the dislike of a life-time. We hated each other when she was Sally Markham and sixteen, and used to kiss boys in corners, and I found her out."

"What has this card to do with me?" said Peggy, showing fight.

Miss Tremaine laughed, a harsh, rather discordant laugh, but one of amusement.

"It's no use, Peggy!"

"I was so sorry for lonely people. I couldn't think of any other way," said Peggy, anxiously. "Of course, it was an idiotic thing to do."

"Yes, it was," observed Miss Tremaine. Then she put the card back into her bag. "Well, I'll say nothing to your father about it. No good worrying him."

But something in Miss Tremaine's tone caught Peggy's sharp ear.

"You minded very much when he was ill?"

"Yes."

"You used to know each other well when you were young?"

"Oh, yes." Then Miss Tremaine actually laughed again. "But I have not loved him for long years in secret, my dear. Jim Hewitt was always a fool!"

"Miss Tremaine!"

The elder woman put a thin, dry hand on Peggy's shoulder.

"This card makes me begin to think you are the same sort of fool, Peggy. You will spoil Charley as your father has spoilt your mother, and all my training will be wasted."

Then Miss Tremaine went back home to order lamb chops for supper, because she considered all small dishes economical, and Peggy pursued her way down the village with a new blouse pattern for Miss Batten, who also offered congratulations.

"I hope I shall make him happy," said Peggy, glowing and smiling among the fashion-plate ladies.

"You'll do that best by letting him make you happy," said Miss Batten. "(Excuse me machining on, I'm very

busy!) Lots of women get so jaded with trying to make other people's happiness that they have none of their own to give out. Don't you turn into a patent sacrificer. A patent sacrificer in the house is like a patent egg-boiler; it does what's right but it somehow underboils or over-boils the eggs."

Peggy laughed, radiant in the lilac gown, while the fashion-plate ladies from the walls simpered discreetly.

"Do I look like a patent sacrificer?"

Miss Batten glanced up with shrewd, twinkling eyes.

"It's just those that don't look——" Then she laughed too. "Anyway, you're all right now."

And, indeed, during the sunshiny weeks of that wonderful summer, Peggy knew a light, clear happiness such as we imagine when we think of blue summers in old Greece and girls in white tossing balls against a cloudless sky—it was equally untouched by life's real cares and apprehensions.

But the summer passed over, marked, as all seasons are in Little Pendleton, by the flowers in the cottage gardens. Dahlias overblown—chrysanthemums caught by night frost—a forlorn monthly rose flowering through the first snowstorm—red berries on the holly—snowdrops shooting; there is no need at all for a calendar if you walk down the main street of any English village, knowing the signs you see there.

And now the lilac was out again before Young Taylor's house, and a second baby had arrived to keep the old one company, but it chanced to come crying into the flowery, showery world on the same day as the baby at the Hall, so people only said:

"Taylors have got another," and went on at once to speak of the shirts and bibs and other garments which had lain in waiting for the fortunate heir of the Lawrys.

Unfortunately, as so often happens, the heir turned out to be a little girl, with a lusty appetite and a great

likeness to her father. But Ethel was just as pleased in the end, because mothers are made so; and she looked very happy, a few weeks later, driving to the Rectory with her smart nurse by her side.

Peggy was alone in the drawing-room when Ethel came in, carrying her baby, and the two friends kissed over the little sleeping form.

"I wanted to bring her to see you first," said Ethel. "Isn't she a darling? Look at her little feet."

Peggy kissed the little tender feet, smelling of violet powder and felt nearer to this friend of all her life than she had ever done before, and yet further away—immeasurably far away.

"How sweet!" she murmured. "It seems so strange, Ethel. You, with a baby!"

"It's worth it all, Peggy. You don't know until you get one."

They looked at each other with sweet, grave eyes, as they spoke thus about the mystery and purpose of womanhood. But the child stirred and began to cry, and Mrs. Hewitt came in, and the nurse took baby home again while Ethel remained for tea.

"So like its father," said Mrs. Hewitt over the tea cups. "You will be delighted at that, Ethel."

"Oh, I am," responded the young wife with obvious sincerity. "James is such a fine-looking man. Odd that your husband and mine should both be called James, Mrs. Hewitt."

Thus the two matrons drew together, leaving Peggy outside; and in a few minutes Lawry himself appeared, effusive, jubilant, anxious for his wife's health and rather demonstratively conjugal.

"I came back with the car to fetch her," he said to Mrs. Hewitt. "This is her first visit and I don't want her to get overtired."

"James is quite a martinet," said Ethel, smiling up at him as he stood with a hand on her shoulder.

Then they went away together, and it cannot be denied that Lawry was pleased to show Peggy how very happy he had managed to be without her, though he felt profoundly thankful she had left him free to choose the wife who now moved across the hall in flowing draperies and white ermine, a really imposing figure.

"Well!" exclaimed Mrs. Hewitt, when Peggy returned to the drawing-room. "I must confess I never expected to see Ethel reduced to that condition; with that red-faced man leaning over her. She looked positively maudlin, and I always thought her so well bred."

"I was so pleased to see her looking happy," said Peggy. "I suppose, Mother, marriage does that," she added reflectively.

"Does what?"

"Makes you think a man splendid whatever he's like—and yet——"

"Yes?"

"Well,"—she could not say—"Look at you and Father!"—so she concluded: "Look at Mr. and Mrs. Branfield Badger!"

Mrs. Hewitt took up her novel.

"You never know what effect marriage will have on people. One thing certain—Lawry won't be going on like that when his tenth arrives."

"Will Ethel?"

"She may want to, but she'll keep it to herself."

"*Must* you change?" said Peggy.

"Of course you must; in marriage as in everything else," replied Mrs. Hewitt, who wished to go on with her book. "By the way, I forgot to tell Mary we would have spiced eggs for supper."

"Charley and I won't be like that," blurted out Peggy from the door.

"Like what, my dear?" said Mrs. Hewitt plaintively.

"Changing."

"Of course not," murmured Mrs. Hewitt, with her eyes on the page. "A little less anchovy in the eggs this time, dear. They made me rather thirsty when we last had some."

So Peggy went out and stood at the open kitchen window while the eggs were boiling; the lilac smelt sweet and Mary was chopping mint, which also gave out a fresh, aromatic fragrance.

"This'll be the last mint I shall chop in this kitchen," sighed Mary. "But I dessay the new girl'll do it better."

"I wish you were not going," said Peggy, taking out the eggs and putting them in cold water. "But I'm glad for you to have a home of your own, Mary."

"Well, Miss," said Mary, "it's just this way. We've walked out and walked out until there's nothing in it. So then we thought we'd get married."

Peggy went on peeling her eggs and beating up the golden yolk with butter, and the light fell pleasantly upon the two girls in the country fragrance of the Rectory kitchen.

"You're really—fond of Bill?"

Mary hesitated.

"I'm not dead gone on him, if that's what you mean," she said. "But he's a good, steady chap and likes things I like and doesn't like things I don't like. We can't neither of us a-bear tripe."

"But you're happy at the thought of getting married?" pursued Peggy, with her eyes on the little rocky pile of white and gold before her.

"Oh, yes," said Mary. "If we was going to get married it was time we did. We'd walked out and walked out until there was nothing in it."

That same evening, Peggy sat sewing at Mary's wedding dress, which Miss Batten had cut out and she was

making. It was the bride's own choice, a very bright blue trimmed with cream lace, and made a gorgeous patch of colour in the lamplight of the Rector's study, where Peggy sat with Tremaine.

"Another wedding!" said Peggy, touching the stuff.

He sighed involuntarily, and coughed to prevent Peggy from noticing the sigh.

"Good sort—Mary," he said. "But when we are married, I stipulate for white."

"I shall have one just like this," laughed Peggy; for the wonderful words "When we are married" which had raised such magic for them when they were first engaged, now fell upon their ears like any other words.

They had talked it all over so many times that there was no freshness left in the idea, and Peggy began to lose her first sensation of perfect happiness.

Mary's leaving seemed to mark this change, for the new maid was quite unequal to Mrs. Hewitt's demands, and Peggy worked in the house with such a restless energy from morning to night that she was often very tired when Tremaine came. Then they would sit in the garden or wander across to his yard, and regain at times the first fervour of their engagement. Deep down, they still had the same great love, which only increased as the days of waiting passed by and they knew each other better. But on the surface there began to be slight misunderstandings. They belonged to each other and grew to take each other for granted, and yet they were not husband and wife with the feeling of instinctive security which that gives. Nature, unsatisfied, was still ready in Tremaine to fight off every man who looked at Peggy. She dreaded, without knowing it, the sign of any change in him. Forces with which they had nothing to do were at work in both of them, jeopardising their love every day.

Sometimes, however, they had a little Indian summer

of delight, when all they had gained since seemed to be added to what they had possessed at first, and they both felt it would be always so when the long engagement was over.

But Little Pendleton looked on and saw only that Peggy's gay face grew a little lined about the mouth, though her laugh was as whole-hearted as ever. Love had not blinded her eyes to all the jolly, funny things in life any more than grief could do—thus God always makes up to those who suffer with a laugh, for they suffer most.

Stocks, as he prodded at the onion bed, thought bitterly of Mrs. Lawry rushing through the village street in her fine car, with her husband and nurse and baby all arrayed about her, and he said in confidence to the worms:

"I done what I could for Miss Peggy, but I doubt she was too thin. Squire wanted more of an armful."

"Stocks!" called Peggy. "You've only watered that lettuce where it shows from the path."

"And more trustinger," added Stocks, glaring in her direction. "Who blames him? I wouldn't marry one like her if I was a Squire, not if she brought her weight with her in golden sovereigns."

All the same, he grew resentful of every fresh wedding in the church, and was apt to put footstools where shy brides would trip over them. He felt his prestige to be sadly lowered by the unsuccessful end of the match-making in which he had aspired to lead Little Pendleton. And when people asked, "Well, when's Miss Peggy and Mr. Charles going to make a match of it?" he would grunt and answer nothing.

But he used to say to himself that if she had married Squire they would all have been glad to say they did it, but now they turned the whole thing off on poor old Stocks.

Tremaine saw him in this mood one evening, hanging over the churchyard wall.

"Well, Stocks—meditating?"

But Tremaine's jauntiness under the circumstances annoyed Stocks.

"I was a-thinking," he said slowly, "that you'd trod the grass off that path between here and the Rectory pretty bare by now. Time you give it a chance to grow. But mebbe you will be doing before long."

"I'm afraid not, Stocks."

"I hear you've got swine-fever among your prize pigs, sir. And them doing so well before."

"Yes. They're to be destroyed to-morrow."

"But you get compensation."

"What's that? When I can't keep any more for goodness knows how long and my styes all standing empty. How's a small farmer to live, Stocks?"

Stocks shook his head.

"Life's full o' trouble. I believe I should get melancholy thinking about it all if I lived in one o' them quiet places. But there was the Penny Reading and then your pigs being killed to-morrow. There's always something going on in Little Pendleton."

CHAPTER XXXIV

HOPE DEFERRED

ON the very day after Tremaine's pigs were destroyed, and with them any hope of being married that year, the lovers had one of the happy times before referred to, which shone so beautifully in remembrance, that afterwards, when they were old, they would come to think their courtship had all been as bright.

They had walked with baskets to a lane they knew of, in search of red leaves and berries for the Harvest Festival, harvest having come again, and then they went into the garden of a large farmhouse which was to let. It had been occupied by a rather surly old widower and Peggy chanced to have never been inside before, so they now fetched the key from the labourer's cottage in order to go over it. For they shared, with many other young people, the secret joy of going over empty houses and seeing themselves on either side of the fire. Pretty dreams which break at a word—bubbles blown from the pipe of fancy by happy lovers.

When Peggy, therefore, stood by the hearth glancing down at the empty fireplace, Tremaine pictured himself coming in wet and tired from the fields to find her here, at home, ready for him.

"And your big chair would be in this corner—and mine there," responded Peggy, smiling across at him.

"Not so far apart as that. I should want to be where I could touch you," said Tremaine, putting his arm round her.

"Not so near as all that," laughed Peggy, "or you

would get a needle in your eye and people would say, 'There goes the man whose wife stabbed him with a needle!' Why, we should get into Madame Tussaud's."

"We shouldn't come here for our honeymoon, silly girl," he answered.

"If this were going to be our home, we should," said Peggy. "There would be the wedding at Little Pendleton church, and then we should just come down the honeysuckle lane here, with the bells all ringing. No tiresome hotel with waiters staring. Our own home, Charley!"

"Oh, Pegs! Our own home!"

And they stood looking together at the wide hearth, faces alight, eyes shining.

"If some one would only give us a fortune, I do believe there is some kind millionaire, all crusty outside and nice and soft within, who would if he knew how we felt; I do, indeed," said Peggy earnestly, and it is quite sure, at any rate, that there are many who would give a fortune to feel as these penniless young people did then.

"How should you use your fortune?" said Tremaine, smiling at her as a man smiles at a woman when he is going to make a good husband, for nothing helps a man to be faithful like being able to love and laugh at his wife together.

"I'll tell you!" said Peggy. "I should have the house very nice, and take Mother something delicious to eat every day, and Father lots of new books; and then I should do something for lonely women." She blushed at the twinkle in his eye. "Not a silly plan like the card Miss Tremaine showed you, you goose! But I should think, and think, until I got a good idea. Then we should be all lovely and happy inside and there would be people happier outside because we were happy——" She broke off. "Oh, I get muddled when I try to tell about it all,

but I can see it just as plain as plain. Can't you, Charley?"

"I can see you like Mrs. Branfield Badger, keeping fate in a good temper with baskets of tomatoes for Miss Wilson," he teased.

"It's easy to make fun!" she cried. "Say what you'll do."

"Me," he said lightly. "Oh, I should breed prize pigs."

"Nothing else?"

"Make love to you."

"But seriously, Charley?"

"Seriously?" He walked to the window and looked out. "Well, I know what I should like to do better than anything in the world. I should like to make the small farmer articulate, let people know what he feels and thinks and suffers. Nobody could do that but a man who has been a small farmer, and they mostly die of a broken heart or just silently plod on, keeping body and soul together. They have no time to talk and no chance to assert their rights. Look at Robinson! Always on the verge of bankruptcy. Always haggardly watching the weather, with ruin ready to get him and his family if there's a wet haytime, or too much drought for the turnips." He turned, flushed and excited, from the window. "My word, Peggy, I mean it. If ever I am a rich man, I'll go into Parliament; I'll stump the country; I'll give England no rest until I've made the small farmer heard above the din of everybody complaining."

"And I'll come with you," cried Peggy, catching fire from him, half laughing and half in earnest. "We'll have mass meetings. Mr. Charles Tremaine will now address the electors of Melbury. 'Ladies and Gentlemen, unaccustomed as I am to addressing an ordinary audience, I do know something about pigs——' No! That won't

do!" She broke off, breathless, and they both laughed together. "Now let us go and see the rest of the house."

So they ran up the broad, shallow oaken stairs and in and out of the echoing rooms and peered through dusty windows, and at last gave up the key and came home with their leaves and berries through the autumn sunset. The bright light gradually faded out of their faces as it did out of the evening sky, and when they reached Little Pendleton they wore the same look of rather wistful quiet as the sky.

"Summer's over," said Peggy as a shower of dead leaves fell upon them.

"Autumn weather," answered Tremaine. Then he went on for a little way and said suddenly: "We can't go on like this, Peggy."

"Like what?" said she, startled.

"Why, always talking about being married and never getting any nearer. I'm tired of waiting."

"Why, what's come to you, Charley?"

"It was seeing that house, and thinking—— Look here, Pegs, we've got to get married and chance it. Aunt Harriet offers us a sitting room. I know you won't like it, but we can't go on like this forever. It's telling on both of us. I heard somebody say the other day, 'Peggy Hewitt's getting that peaked look girls wear during a long engagement.' I'm not going to have you look like that on my account."

"Wait a little longer," pleaded Peggy. "Poor old boy, I know it's hard. But how would you live with two bickering women?—and we should bicker."

"Aunt Harriet's getting very fond of you," he replied.

"I know. I'm glad," said Peggy. "But it would be every day and all day. A time would come when we should positively hate each other for little things that neither of us can help. And you in the middle of it!"

For the moment, he wished Peggy were less clear

sighted and more, as Stocks would put it, "trustinger." Then he looked at her pale face, a little worn and tired, and he felt a great uprush of tenderness and pity.

"You've had nothing but worry and unhappiness with me. The wonder is that you can love me still!"

"Charley! Charley!" she said, clinging to him. "I want you as badly as you want me. I think I care for you more every day; but I can't marry you to make you miserable!"

So they went in to supper, at which meal Mrs. Hewitt did not trouble to sparkle any more, because Tremaine had come two or three nights a week for so long. The Rector looked kindly though a little sadly at them, loving Tremaine as a son, but feeling that Peggy's youth was being spoiled by this long engagement. Jack sat by the supper table, but he also was rather silent, planning an expedition with Bobby Parker on the morrow. He still admired his future brother-in-law and they were great friends, though he thought it was rather rot always having people about the place who looked cross and jumped up as if they were shot when you came into the study without knocking. That was how he expressed it in confidence to Bobby Parker.

"I know," said Bobby Parker sagely. "None o' that when they once *are* married, I tell you. Then it's 'Mind my hat, please!' from her. Or him shaking her off and looking vexed if she snoodles round when he doesn't want."

"Licks me why they ever do want," said Jack.

"Girls are made like that," said Bobby Parker.

So it was with a measure of kindly contempt that Jack viewed the lovers rise from the table and move towards the now dusky garden.

"Oh, Peggy!" called Mrs. Hewitt. "Could you find me those lavender ribbons before you go?"

"Will it do when I come in, Mother?"

"Of course: only I just feel able to thread the dressing jacket now. I don't know how I may feel when you come in," replied Mrs. Hewitt. "It is not as if you only saw Charley once a week." And she sighed.

So Peggy left her lover to search for the lavender ribbons, while he walked on to their favourite seat in the summer house and there sat down on a heap of sharp beech nuts thoughtfully placed in position by Master Jack.

"D——!" said Tremaine, jumping up.

"He! He!" giggled Jack involuntarily from behind the summer house.

Tremaine brushed the nuts away and sat down again, annoyed with Jack and Mrs. Hewitt and the entire Hewitt family. If he were not welcome he would stop away. He felt ridiculously angry and humiliated as he sat there by himself in the dark.

At last Peggy came out and sat down by him.

"Oh!" she said, putting her hand on the sharp husk of a stray beech nut.

"Pleasing little jest of Jack's!" said Tremaine disagreeably. "It's time that young man went away to school. Your father really ought to try and do something."

"Father is coaching him for a scholarship," said Peggy quickly.

"Um! That's rather a slow process," said Tremaine; and the instant thought flashed through Peggy's mind that if she had chosen Lawry instead of the man beside her Jack would now have been at a good preparatory school. But she banished it at once and put her hand affectionately through Tremaine's arm to make up for having had such a disloyal recollection.

"I'm sorry you've had to wait. Shall we go for our walk now?" she said.

"Too late. There's no moon and the roads are pitch dark."

"Then shall we go in, Charley?"

"No, thank you. I think I'll be off!"

"But why, dear?" said Peggy.

"To tell the truth, I think I have rather worn out my welcome at the Rectory," he answered. "I don't intend to come to supper any more for the present."

"But, Charley, how ridiculous!" cried Peggy, astonished.

"Ridiculous or not, I'm going now." He rose and kissed her perfunctorily. "Good night."

"Good night," said Peggy. Then she began to laugh. "Charley, you did that as if we'd been married twenty years and your gout was troubling you. And I feel as if the cook had just given notice. And yet we're an engaged couple in a garden on a lovely autumn night. But I don't want to say 'Darling!' I want to say, 'Charles, how is your poor toe? I'm afraid you've had too much beef again.'"

He laughed too, but half-heartedly.

"I know I'm like a bear with a sore head, Peggy. Forgive me!"

"Poor old boy! I understand. There's nothing to forgive. You and I could never quarrel."

They both remembered, even as she spoke, that they had quarrelled about nothing the week previously, and they felt dismayed. But their leave taking, after that, was what it had been two years ago, and they parted in a mood of wistful tenderness; still, the sense of dismay was there, behind it all.

On the next evening they attended the Harvest Festival together, feeling as if they had been parted and had been reconciled again, though no such parting had taken place. Peggy's emotions that night were finely strung, ready to respond to a breath passing across them, and she

experienced an ecstasy which was keen enough to be almost painful during those few moments when the people all kneeled silent in the grey and crimson and gold of the little church and her father stood blessing them.

The Rector, too, felt moved and thankful, remembering that Harvest Festival three years ago when he had thought himself to be saying farewell to the good opinion of his parishioners and all that had made his place in Little Pendleton worth having. He glanced round now, no longer serenely aloof, as in his earlier years, but wondering who was full of care, as he had been, and asking God from his heart to help all such. Then he knelt humbly, praying with his people, knowing what it was to be driven to make ruinous mistakes, knowing what it was to lie awake until dawn. In every struggling or ruined man he saw, but for the grace of God, the Rector of Little Pendleton.

And nowadays, when he went in his long black coat up and down the street, he was indeed vaguely connected with God's kindness by the people of the village, which is no bad thing for a parson to be, even if his flock do consider him wanting in enterprise.

For instance, the Vicar of Great Pendleton, who had preached this evening, was now a Canon, and Mrs. Butcher Dunn said, when she emerged, (it is still customary to distinguish ladies by their husband's profession when convenient in Little Pendleton) "You want push and go in religion, like in everything else. Look at the Squire, sitting there on a Sunday with Miss Torwood all blossomed out into a regular Madame, and everybody coming to the hall from the old Duke downwards, and see what push does. It isn't—I don't want to be profane, Mrs. Jenkins—but it isn't faith that works miracles these days; it's push!"

"Well," said the landlady, "I'd like to see our Rector Canoned too, of course. But I'd rather have him as he

is in his old black coat if I was dying than any Bishop in the land."

"Don't!" said Mrs. Dunn, a cold-natured woman loving food and raiment and comfort to excess. "I can't bear to hear dying talked about. It gives me the creeps."

"We—we all got to die some time," responded the landlady jollily. "Good night, all!"

So another Harvest Festival was over, and winter setting in. Peggy now sewed again for Miss Batten and spent the proceeds on fine lawn and linen with which to make her wedding clothes. There was no lace, but the most exquisite stitchery and embroidery, and she felt a great pleasure in seeing the dainty piles grow in her wardrobe. Happy thoughts and dreams, and summer hours and long winter afternoons and starlit nights were all sewn into the white garments, and wherever the bride lived they would have a fragrance of Little Pendleton.

Peggy was sewing in the drawing-room about Christmas time when Mrs. Hewitt remarked that such fine sewing was bad for the eyesight; she seemed to dislike seeing her daughter at work on the trousseau.

"Time enough when the things are needed," she said. "You never know what is going to happen."

"Oh," said Miss Wilson, who was calling, "it will be delightful in any case, Mrs. Hewitt, to have things like these. If dear Peggy marries, as we expect, she will need them, and if not, she will find them so useful for birthday presents. A friend of mine had her engagement broken off after nine years—I forget why; I think the gentleman met some one else he liked better; most unfortunate but better then, than too late—and she did not care to wear the garments herself, because they reminded her of him. But she never wanted for a nice present to give a female acquaintance for years; and always so acceptable; I have a camisole she gave me now."

"Well, you shall have one of mine if I give any away," said Peggy, laughing.

"No, no. I would rather you got married," said Miss Wilson. "But it just shows that our dear Peggy's trouble in tucking and hemming need not be wasted, after all, Mrs. Hewitt."

The Rector's wife also smiled, and then the Rector and Tremaine came in to tea and all was most pleasant, but that very evening the inevitable happened.

Peggy and Tremaine quarrelled again over a trifle and parted without kissing for the first time since their engagement. They spent a miserable night and day and met the next evening at Miss Tremaine's, where Peggy had already arranged to take supper. During the meal and afterwards in Miss Tremaine's presence Peggy was unpleasingly and unnaturally "bright," while Tremaine pronounced rather dictatorially upon the current topics of the day.

Then Miss Tremaine went to fetch a book and the door closed on her.

"Funny how people always call elderly females 'Aunt'! Now you could just as well have said 'Cousin Harriet.' I only intend to be Aunt to Jack's children, and if they take after him, I shall have my——"

"Peggy," said Tremaine, "this sort of thing has got to end."

"Yes?" said Peggy, suddenly white and still. "You're tired!"

"I am. We must marry and come here. It won't be all bliss, I know that; but it will be better than going on as we are doing now."

Peggy looked down in silence; his gaze was bent on her; there was no fire or ardour in either of them.

"Perhaps it would be best," she said.

"Can you be ready by Easter?"

"Yes. There's nothing to wait for. The rooms here could soon be got ready, I suppose?"

"We should have the little one facing south and the big east one where they keep apples now."

Then it swept across them both, suddenly, in a sort of wave, that this was the moment for which they had so long waited; and how had it come to them in the end?

"Oh, Pegs! Pegs!" he said, seizing her and drawing her to him. "Aren't you glad? Has it gone on until you don't care?"

As she felt his arms close round her and his cheek upon hers, the old glamour came back.

"I care more than I ever did," she said gravely. "What does it matter where we live, or what we do, so long as we belong to each other?"

Then they talked quietly together until Miss Tremaine returned with her book.

"Aunt Harriet," said Tremaine at once, "we have decided to accept your offer. You can get the two rooms ready any time."

Miss Tremaine, naturally, took a seat and drew a long breath.

"Oh!" she said. Then she pulled herself together. "I shall be very pleased to welcome you, Peggy. You thought the east room, didn't you, Charley?" For she had made up her mind to bear everything with patience because of her affection for the lad she had brought up. Not that she disliked the future bride, but she preferred the society of men and boys, and had never cared to be bothered with another woman about the place.

Very soon after that the lovers left for the Rectory, but they took so much time to cross the field and the churchyard that Mrs. Hewitt had already gone to bed. The Rector, however, was still in his study, and smiled at them, as they entered, over his sermon paper.

"Well, Charley! Well, Peggy! You look as if it were a fine night."

"It is, sir. Best I've known so far," said Tremaine.

"Why? What?" He looked questioningly at Peggy.

"We've made up our minds to get married, Father," said Peggy. "We're to live with Miss Tremaine."

The Rector rose and put a hand on a shoulder of each of them as they stood there together.

"You've proved how faithful and strong your love is for each other. That's the best thing in life. I'm glad my Peggy has found it!"

And Tremaine, in this moment of humiliation when he came to ask for his girl without a home of his own to offer her, was deeply touched by the Rector's generosity.

"I'll try——" he said, but could not say any more.

So the men shook hands upon that, for they both knew what it meant. But the Rector sat late in his study that night, thinking what the house would be like without Peggy, and trying to be glad for her sake. It is such a sweet, sharp joy to have a beloved child, and so difficult to sort out the pleasure that hurts from the pain that rejoices. When he went up to bed, however, the gladness stood forth clear and alone; Peggy was happy.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE APPLE-CHAMBER

PEGGY was married very quietly, one April morning, in a white gown made by Miss Batten. The Rector read the service, and Mr. Torwood gave the bride away, while Mrs. Hewitt sat under a stained window with a lace shawl draped about her and a smelling bottle in her hand, and felt she was wonderful to be there at eight o'clock. Miss Tremaine sat in her customary seat wearing a weather-beaten coat and skirt, but the Squire's pew remained empty, the Lawrys being in the south of France. Jack looked the most festal of all, with a large white button-hole and a blue satin tie he had bought for himself at the village shop.

But when the short wedding was over, and Peggy and her husband entered Mr. Torwood's car and were whirled away to the little seaside town where they were to spend their honeymoon, Jack retired into the disused stable, locked the door, and wept until his blue tie was ruined forever. Then, by devious and back ways, he sought the old Mary, who was now Mrs. Bill Walker, and she fed him with the best she had, and cried, too, and was altogether very comforting. So, at one o'clock, he emerged, his own man again, and able to insult Stocks, who leaned dismally over the onion bed, and said he never looked to see Miss Peggy married in a hole-and-corner way like that, without even a ham-sandwich.

"Didn't Mr. Charles give you anything?" said Jack, jealous for the honour of the family.

"He tipped me beyond his means—beyond his means,"

said Stocks heavily. "But, my eye, it's a let-down for the Rectory, it is. Why, Mary had more of a 'do.' I may rake the ground and I may clip the hedge, Master Jack, and make all look as viewly as I can, but I can't keep up a position single-handed. What did them Lawrys give for a wedding present? I hear nothing with this silly new lass in the kitchen. Not but what Mary was a fool, but she had her p'ints; she had her p'ints."

"They sent electro asparagus servers in a case. Meanish, I thought. But a private diamond pendant came from Mrs. Lawry this morning, with a note that made Peggy cry. Girls cry for anything, the day they're being married, don't they? And Charley looked like a cat that's been thrown into the water when he came up the aisle, didn't he? You know how he looked. I'm *never* going to get married."

"Looked all right when they come out, though, both of 'em," grunted Stocks. "I will say that."

"Yes," allowed Jack, "they looked, then, as if somebody had just given them everything they'd been wanting every Christmas since they were born. Marrying's a queer thing, Stocks."

"Ay, it is," said Stocks. "But Mr. Charles is a good-looking young feller, and I expect she thought it was better than her being an old maid. But it's a poor do—a poor do!"

The same opinion was held by the whole of the village, for Little Pendleton still viewed Peggy with the chafed disappointment those know who have tried to marry a nice, impecunious girl off satisfactorily and then, by some foolish mistake on the girl's part, have seen the rich man shoot off in another direction. They felt she was not worth any further efforts. Still, they contributed to a fine new sewing machine and a travelling clock, and hoped she might be happy.

The honeymoon only lasted a few days, and it was

on a Saturday evening that the newly married couple returned to the house across the long field which Peggy had seen so often while she sewed in the early morning. The little south room was crowded with wedding presents and big Victorian furniture, and the great apple-chamber facing east had been made into a bedroom. But despite Miss Tremaine's real wish to show Peggy every kindness there was a constraint in the air at that first meal. It soon wore off, however, and when Peggy and her husband went up to their room, they sat on the edge of the immense half-tester bed, laughing together like school children. It all seemed part of such an immense, lovely joke.

"We must have a couple of armchairs in our room from somewhere," said Tremaine next morning at breakfast.

"What for?" said Miss Tremaine. "I have never had one in my bedroom. Bedrooms are made to sleep and dress and say your prayers in. I hate this modern fashion of pottering about in your sleeping apartment."

But she caused a very uncomfortable velvet and mahogany sofa to be placed near Peggy's window, and the married lovers would sit there sometimes on the summer nights, as unconscious of its lumps as if they had rested on the clouds of Olympus.

During the day, Peggy went a great deal to the Rectory, where the servant left in charge had proved unsatisfactory, though a well-meaning girl, and she at last departed with this final pronouncement: "It's not a maid your mother wants, Mrs. Tremaine, it's a penny in the slot with tea and cocoa laid on."

Then came a maid who neglected the house work, but attended well to Mrs. Hewitt's refreshments, sharing them to such an extent that she put on eight pounds weight in a fortnight. Still, there was peace, and on her evenings out the Rector and Jack filled the hiatus. Peggy

once arrived to find her father anxiously watching the kettle while Jack stirred something in a cup.

"You have to be very careful for it not to lump, haven't you?" Jack was saying gravely.

The sight of them both, so earnest and so engrossed, made Peggy realise that her new love had caused her to forget how very, very dear they were.

"Here's Mrs. Tremaine!" said Jack, for her new name was still a joke to him. And the two looked round with such brightly changed faces that Peggy saw how much they missed her.

"Oh! I was a selfish girl to go and get married and leave you!" she said impulsively. "I ought to have stayed here!" And she embraced them one after the other.

"Get out! I shall spill the cocoa," said Jack. "You may keep all that for Charley; he doesn't seem to mind."

"My dear Peggy," said the Rector, "we want you here, of course. But we would not have had you remain unmarried for our sakes. That would have made us unhappy, wouldn't it, Jack?"

"Oh, well," said Jack, taking up the cup in a business-like way, "I suppose girls will get married."

He arranged the tray quite deftly, and as Peggy watched him the thought came into her mind that Mrs. Hewitt would have trained the cat to wait on her had there been no one else; then remorse followed; it was a shameful thing to joke, even internally, about a suffering mother.

Full of loving contrition, Peggy sat by the familiar sofa, talked over all the little news of the village which had grown so important through the quiet years to the Hewitt family. Then Tremaine came to fetch his wife home, and they walked back across the long field, and he showed her where he had hidden to look at her through the wild roses.

Thus passed the most wonderful summer. Sometimes they would be asked to dine at the large houses in the neighbourhood, and Peggy would bicycle there and back with a mackintosh over her wedding gown. The young friends pitied her, but they need not have done, for those gay rides home through the dark, scented lanes after the excitement of lighted rooms and merry talk were all a part of this continuous honeymoon.

On one such night Peggy's gown caught on the wheel as they passed through the village, and they alighted to walk the rest of the little distance. The houses were all dark, and they glanced up at the Rectory, which was dark, too.

"I feel as if I ought to be going in there," Peggy whispered; it was such fun to sense again the great adventure. She held out her hand primly: "Good-night, Mr. Tremaine; I'm afraid it is rather late!"

He seized her hand and drew her to him.

"You're coming home with me to-night, Miss Peggy!"

Then they laughed softly, and the bicycles fell with a great clash to the ground. Lights flashed out from upper windows, heads peered out.

"Goodness!" said Peggy. "We've gone and awakened Little Pendleton!"

And even the fact that Miss Tremaine was sitting up for them in her grey dressing-gown, though tiresome, did not cloud the young people's sense of joyous holiday.

"Pity you should sit up," said Tremaine, and they felt a vague wish to have a place all to themselves, but it went no deeper.

Then they went up to their own room, which still smelt of the ripe apples which had been stored there during so many years.

But summer is soon over, and by October it grows cold in the north country. Peggy could not bicycle

through the autumn storms in her wedding gown, if it had not come to grief already; and they stayed at home or went to the rectory in the evenings. The fireplace in the little south sitting-room smoked and Miss Tremaine considered it a great trouble and extravagance to have one in the bedroom, so they all sat together downstairs. Things which had not seemed to matter at all began to be rather a burden now. Peggy no longer laughed at the path which Miss Tremaine's servant made between the kitchen and the refuse tub. She found no joke, as she had done, in seeing the fowls perform acrobatic feats with pieces of meat which were paid for by her husband and were quite fitted for household consumption. The orderly, precise, hopeless incompetence of Miss Tremaine's housekeeping began to get on her nerves.

She was happy, underneath, with a settled happiness beyond anything she had pictured in her girlish dreams; she possessed already the beginning of that deep, abiding love of the wife for her husband which comes soon to some and later to others, but which nothing can change save his unfaithfulness when it is once there.

But the surface of Peggy's life began to be troubled: she longed secretly for a place, however small, that she could call her own, and yet she hid this thought most carefully from Tremaine, lest it should seem a reproach to him for not having provided such a home. The only person who found out this dissatisfaction was Miss Batten. Peggy, of course, did not mention any particular incident, but she did say, with a sigh, that it would be nice to have a little house like Miss Batten's.

"Um," agreed Miss Batten, putting on the kettle. "I wouldn't even share houses with an angel that had learnt how to cook—and I can't say more than that!"

"Not that I'm not *most* happy with Miss Tremaine," explained Peggy anxiously.

"I know," responded Miss Batten. "You're like a crab in a whelk shell, Miss Peggy—Mrs. Tremaine; you fit all right, but it isn't like being born a whelk."

Then the ladies took tea together without further reference to this subject; but Peggy went home comforted.

And soon Christmas was in sight, when the Lawrys gave a large New Year's dinner party to which the Tremaines were invited. Mrs. Lawry had quickly achieved a "manner," and was very magnificent in pale green and silver; but her greeting to Peggy was as warm and simple as ever.

"We don't see as much of each other as we ought," she said, kissing her friend with real affection. "There's nobody ever like you, Pegs. But I'm always in a rush somehow. There is never any time."

And Mrs. Lawry had indeed become a notable figure on charitable committees, ranking in this respect next to the old Duchess and before young Lady St. Maldon, so there were really very few days in the year when she could spare a couple of hours for an old friend from the round of social and charitable engagements in which she had involved her life.

As Lawry glanced at his Ethel, whose chest had already taken on the impressive solidity which such an existence seems to impart, and then at Peggy, straight and girlish in her pale-yellow gown, he thanked whatever powers inhabited his inner sanctuary that he had had such a merciful escape. His gratitude overflowed in such attentions to Peggy that his wife became quite jealous, and Tremaine said, with a laugh, that poor old Lawry hadn't got over it yet: like many good husbands, he was apt to think that every other fellow's wife was only a makeshift.

But he was a man, and therefore fell out with his wife one day simply because he was late for breakfast, and she had mislaid a newspaper containing an adver-

tisement of some particular poultry food, which did not matter in the least. But it did matter that this quarrel took place before Miss Tremaine, for her presence gave an added point and seriousness to the impatient words uttered on both sides, and made it impossible to smooth things over by those little marks of affection which married people who love each other use to make friends. A slight habit of reserve grew upon them in time. They saved things to tell each other afterwards, and then forgot, or the opportunity came too late.

Miss Tremaine, too, possessed her side of the question, for she undoubtedly found it a burden to have Peggy always about the house, and the sight of mutual adoration, however restrained, is not amusing to the onlooker.

Things were in this state one January morning when Miss Tremaine took up her letters and said casually:

"Oh! A circular from the Palladium Oil Company. You'd wonder they ever sent them," and went on pouring out coffee.

"Perhaps they're going to pay a dividend after all these years," said Tremaine with a laugh, buttering his toast.

"Not very likely. My poor brother! It was a sad pity he put all his own eggs as well as mine into that basket!" sighed Miss Tremaine.

"Anyway, it showed he was perfectly honest and straight," said Peggy.

"He was my brother," said Miss Tremaine, opening the envelope. Then she turned pale under all the little red veins in her cheeks. "It's a dividend! They're paying a dividend! It's incredible!"

"I don't know," said Tremaine, rising. "Let me look. I heard a little while ago that the Palladium Oil Company was the one Lawry went over to Canada to

investigate before he was married. But I said nothing about it. I didn't want you to be disappointed."

"I thought that was American," interposed Peggy.

"He went to America. But the actual oil springs are in Canada."

"He's so wonderful—look at the grocers' shops!" gasped Miss Tremaine, beginning to feel less stunned. "Oh, Peggy, with my brother's money and my own, I have seventy thousand pounds in it—if they're paying five per cent., as it seems to say, I shall never have to bother about the cold mutton any more!"

And this cry from the heart showed how, in spite of appearances, the poor lady had tried to struggle with the problems of a small income.

"I'll bicycle over to see Lawry before going to the bank," said Tremaine, going out into the hall with his breakfast half eaten. Then he paused at the door and whispered to his wife: "Oh, Pegs, if it's only all right!"

Then Peggy returned to the table where the two women made a pretence of nibbling their toast, and the minutes seemed very long before Tremaine raced back round the bend of the Rectory Lane, waving his handkerchief so wildly that the bicycle rocked from side to side. Peggy and Miss Tremaine ran out into the road and stood with the wind and rain blowing across them, not feeling it.

"Well?"

"It's true!" Tremaine shouted. "Don't you remember—old Lawry—your brother—the same town?"

He swerved and jumped off, his mackintosh cape flapping in the rain.

"Then the company has pulled round?" said Miss Tremaine.

"Sound as a bell. Oil was always there. Been mismanaged. You can realise any time you like."

"Thank God!" said Miss Tremaine, and she fainted away among the mud and driving leaves for the first and only time in her life.

But it is so easy to get used to good fortune, and before the winter was over all sorts of things which had looked like dreams became commonplace facts. The Manor Farm, for instance, where Tremaine once had that lovely vision of Peggy beside his hearth, was now their solid, future dwelling-place, needing a new drainage system, and a great deal doing to the chimneys. Miss Tremaine had sold a certain number of her oil shares and lent Tremaine the money, so the great farm-buildings grew full of new implements, stock appeared in the fold yards, pigs of the most paying breed in the pig-styes, with Tremaine's shrewd eye overlooking every detail. Furniture came in vans from London and Melbury as a wedding present from Miss Tremaine, and at last, one April evening, Peggy and her husband left the grey house and the apple-scented chamber for a home of their own.

They stood waiting in the little garden that was full of daffodils all in flower, blowing to and fro in the evening breeze, while the carrier's cart lumbered slowly through the village on its way to remove their boxes and Peggy's sewing machine.

"There'll be carrier going to take Miss Peggy's things," said Stocks at the door of the Blue Lion. "I think I'll go and lend a hand. Mebbe he'll scratch the new sewing machine."

"Well," said the landlord, "I don't mind if I walk that way, too."

"Wait a minute," said the landlady. "I'll pop on my hat and come along."

Then a few steps down the street they met Miss Batten with the postmistress, and Young Mrs. Taylor ran out from her cottage door to ask what was toward, so

that quite a crowd rounded the bend in the lane by the time the carrier put on the last box.

The cart moved on, and Peggy had said farewell to Miss Tremaine, and was just putting one foot on her bicycle, when she glanced round and saw the people coming round the corner.

"What's this?" said her husband.

"Why," cried Peggy, "I do believe they've come to say good-bye!"

So saying, she flung her bicycle into the hedge, ran into the middle of the group, and shook hands first with one and then another, while Stocks always afterwards maintained that she kissed him in mistake for Miss Batten. But at last her husband dragged her away and she mounted her bicycle, calling out over her shoulder:

"I'm going now. But I shall always be just the same. As long as I live I shall be Peggy of Little Pendleton."

These people, who had known her all her life, watched her gallant young figure grow smaller and smaller and at last disappear.

"It's true," said Miss Batten, the tears streaming from her eyes. "She'd be our Miss Peggy if she married a King and lived in Timbuctoo!"

"Aye, we shall miss her. Not that she's perfect by no means," said Stocks. "However, we got her a good husband at last."

"Why," interposed Young Mrs. Taylor, "that's just what we *didn't* do!"

Stocks looked at her and she moved back.

"That's just like wimmen," he said. "On'y see the top o' things and think they know all. Wasn't it Little Pendleton as di-rected Squire's notice to Miss Peggy? And wasn't it Squire's notice as made Mr. Charles want her? And so she got comfortably settled."

"But," persisted Young Mrs. Taylor, cowed but not

beaten, "she was walking out with Mr. Charles before ever she met Squire."

"How many did you walk out with before you got Young Taylor? Did any o' them ever ask you to name the day?" retorted Stocks.

So Young Mrs. Taylor sank abashed into silence, and the listeners began to think that there was something in what Stocks said.

"When you think," said the landlady, "Mr. Charles *had* been dangling after her ever since she was in pigtails and nothing come of it."

"Nor wouldn't, if it hadn't been for us," added the postmistress.

So the little crowd dispersed, and soon Little Pendleton went to bed under the starlight, satisfied with the result of its matchmaking.

Stocks, however, when walking upstairs candle in hand stood still and shook his head.

"I like stir," he said, "and I like life. But there's a bit too much goes on in Little Pendleton."

Then the lights twinkled out once more from upper casement windows, and Peggy watched them from the bedroom of her new home, whence they looked more than ever like a little street of stars answering back good-night to the quiet stars above.

She stood there for such a long time that her husband came up and put his arm about her and looked out, too:

"Well, Pegs?"

"I'm only saying good-night to Little Pendleton. Charley, I've been so happy there. I didn't know. I wonder if it will be just the same about the dear old earth when we go elsewhere. If all the unhappy things will just fade out."

He held her closer to him, making no other reply.

"But we're going to be happier here, even than we

have been in Little Pendleton," she whispered after a long pause. "I waited until to-night—I wanted to tell you in our own home——"

At the same moment Stocks blew out his candle.

"Good house," he muttered. "Hot water laid on. Not a bad-looking feller! She ought to be thankful to Little Pendleton!"

THE END

MAY 1 - 1917